

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

WINTER 2020

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the "BEST OF"
2020

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Protagonists

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Inspired by Actual Events
with Jon Land

JOSEPH BADAL

When Your Only
Weapon is Inaction

DENNIS PALUMBO

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2020...the year we *all* want to forget. As we turn the page on this chapter of history, we are very pleased to give you the best news of the year—the names of who made *Suspense Magazine's* “Best of” list, penning the most memorable, enjoyable, and highest nominated books in all genres.

We talked about it before, but for those of you who are new to *Suspense Magazine*, first: Shame on you! Where have you been?? Oh...it's okay, we understand that

there are other sites and places to visit, but we are glad you are with us now. We had a ton of votes this year and, as always, it was extremely difficult to pick the winners. There are so many great authors writing some truly wonderful stories out there that it goes without saying, every year there are bound to be some left off the list.

Last year, L.A. Chandler was the *Crimson Scribe Award* winner with, “The Pearl Dagger.” This year, we have a surprise when it comes to this award: For the first time ever a horror book was voted as “Best Book of the Year,” and it is.... Oh, come on, you don't expect me to just reveal it here, do you? Heck no. You are going to actually have to do some work and flip through the pages of the magazine. Besides, you don't want to miss all the other categories, the great interviews, the special articles, reviews, and so much more!

This is also the time of year when we at Suspense need to thank all of YOU! We are so happy and honored that you guys have stuck with us through almost one hundred issues, over five hundred podcasts and, of course, all the great books we have published, including our first ever anthology that appeared this year: “Nothing Good Happens After Midnight.” This title is a fantastic conglomeration of tales written by some of the masters of the literary world, including Jeffery Deaver, Rhys Bowen, Linwood Barclay, Hank Phillippi Ryan, Jon Land, Heather Graham, D.P. Lyle, Shannon Kirk, Paul Kemprecos, Alan Jacobson, Kevin O'Brien and Joseph Badal. It was such a great experience that we are going to do it again in 2021, this time with #1 *NY Times* bestselling author Catherine Coulter, so be sure to look for it when the end of 2021 rolls around.

Let's all hope that 2021 is not the nightmare that 2020 was. We're excited about the future and happy that you'll all come along with us for the ride to enjoy this new chapter in history. In the end, I say: Thank you, thank you, thank you all so much. We at Suspense love you all. Please EVERYONE, stay safe, stay healthy, and have a wonderful holiday season.

Now...enough of my yapping. Enjoy the rest of this “Best of 2020” issue!

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



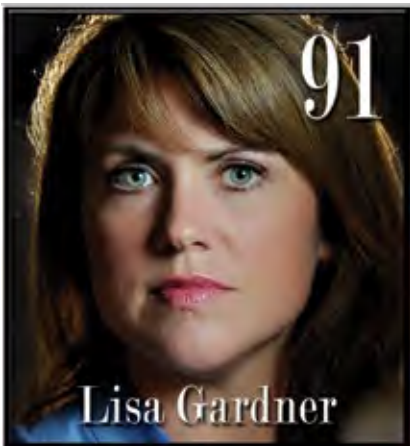
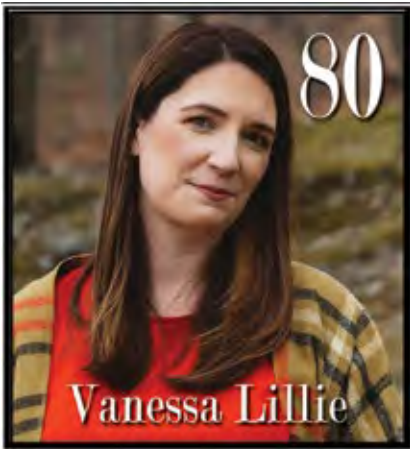
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SHOT REVERSE SHOT

By J.B. Toner

“Look, man,” I sighed out a gust of smoke. “I don’t really do torture, and my guy’s outta town for the week. Why don’t you just give me the code, and we’ll go get a drink? You know McDermott’s gonna assume you talked anyway, so you’re already out of a job.”

The guy in the chair bared his teeth in a sneer, and snarled. “The legendary Domingo Jack. You think I ain’t hearda you? Everybody’s hearda you in this town. And when word gets around that you tried to crack me and couldn’t, I’m gonna have more job offers than I know what to do with.”

“No offense, friend, but I’m not sure you’ve thought this through. Even if you survive the experience, you’re not gonna be employable.”

“Yeah, what’re you gonna do? Yank out a few fingernails? Go ahead. You just said it yourself, you ain’t a torture guy. You’re gonna lose stomach for this before I do.”

I finished my cigarette. Flicked it into the dank pool of standing water where the sewer-pipes dripped forever. Lit another.

“Well, friend, you’ve gotta do what you feel is right. But I hope you’ll reconsider while you still have enough strength to get to the hospital.” Unfolding my X-Acto knife, I leaned down and calmly slashed him open from the inner elbows to the zip ties biting into his wrists. Then, while he screamed and cursed and pumped his lifeblood into his lap, I took a pull from one of my bourbon flasks and booted up my laptop. It wasn’t easy getting a signal down here, but I knew where to stand.

“You bastard! You crazy son of a bitch!”

“Hang on, I’m logging in. Be right with you.”

“You go to Hell, Jack! I ain’t tellin’ you shit!”

“Well, you say that now, but a lotta guys change their minds after the second gallon. ’Course, by then it’s a bit late.”

He stared at me. Stared down at his spurting forearms. Struggled ineffectually. Then: “How do I know you won’t just let me bleed out?”

“Cause you’re a big guy and this is my favorite spot. It’s way less work to let you tomato-can your way to the ER than it would be to haul your dead ass outta here.”

He hesitated.

I frowned clinically at the gushing wounds. “Say, that’s kind of a high resting heart rate you got there, friend. You might want to look into getting some aerobic exercise. I mean, you know, unless—”

“Okay, all right, I’ll give you the damn code! What the hell do you want it for, anyhow?”

“Oh, you wanna talk about me? It’s your dime, I guess. I was born on a winter’s day in the snowy glen of Donegal—”

“12EM84! The code’s 12EM84, now lemme out!”

“Hold, please.” I typed it in. “Hey, look at that, it works. I hope you weren’t counting on all those job offers.”

“Fuck you! Come on, lemme out!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep your shirt on.” I cut his right hand loose from the arm of the chair and slapped the X-Acto knife into his palm. “Sinai Medical’s twelve blocks east. You should probably hurry.”

Once I got back to my car, I took another bourbon-slug and started perusing files. I'd picked Morbidly Obese McDermott as the target of my espionage because of his well-known Hollywood ties. In the event of my real quarry getting wind of today's shenanigans, she would (hopefully) assume I was after the portly Mafioso's files for showbiz-related reasons.

Yep, I work in movies. D.J. Esq., proprietor of the Fight Corps: the top action choreographers in the trade. At present, we were engineering the latest installment of the cinematic gold mine that was Chase Hardrock, out-beater of your shit. It was one hell of a lot of hard work and fun, and it kept us way too busy to fret about a powerful, psychotic new Mob boss who might or might not be preparing to pursue a vendetta against us.

Nonetheless, I was fretting. My purloining of McDermott's secrets had nothing to do with his fat fingers diddling the pie of the motion picture industry; all I wanted was one phone number.

And there it was: the private digits of Ruby Kell. A few weeks earlier, she'd ascended to the Golgothic throne of the SoCal Mafia after a cataclysmic clandestine shoot-out between the IRA and the SAS on American soil. Since then, she'd been murdering the ever-loving shit out of the Brits' families, along with any mobsters who didn't fancy taking orders from women and/or sadistic maniacs. And there were darker rumors—whispers of black magic and human sacrifice. She was just bad news all the way around.

For the time being, however, all I wanted was the ability to keep tabs. As long as I had Kell's cell number, my tech-whiz of a mom could track her location to within a few yards. If the occasion should arise for us to (say) accidentally run her over a few times, it was wise to prepare the option.

As I sat behind my steering wheel in the late morning alley-shade, drinking good whiskey and making notes, my hip began to buzz. I flipped out my phone and said, "Jack."

"Hey buddy, where you at? We're blockin' out Scene 24."

Our pugilist, Joey Damascus. The dashboard clock read 11:06. I was due on set.

"Yeah, sorry, on my way. Be there in ten."

My crew was walking through the geography of the first major set piece when I arrived. Darkson Kilmore had mysteriously returned from his apparent demise in the Gobi Desert, and his fiendish plans were finally about to—yadda yadda—fight scene. Kilmore's wiry henchfellow had just cornered Hardrock in a defunct cathedral, and we wanted the ensuing violence to make full use of the space. Right now they were up in the choir loft.

Joey nodded to me as I walked in. "Just in time for the good stuff."

"I am the good stuff."

A fevered shotgun battle had exploded a half dozen

stained-glass windows, and both men were now out of ammo. In the sequence we were doing next, they would duel across the shattered glass, wielding their 12-gauges like bo-staffs. While I observed, the G.I.-clad actors began a half-speed rehearsal. The execution was flawless; the choreography was tight, well-paced, and kinetic.

I heard myself mutter, "God damn it."

Quietly present, Damascus put a hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong, D.J.?"

"I dunno, man. It just feels like we've done all this before. Like there's nothing new left to do."

"We'll figure it out."

"Yeah."

My hip buzzed again. I flipped out my phone. Didn't recognize the number.

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Mr. Jack, this is Sergeant Vorn with the 15th Precinct. Do you know a Declan Morrow?"

Cautiously: "I believe so." Morrow was a soldier with the IRA. He was the real target of the Brits that whacked Ruby Kell's predecessor. He was also the reason I'm half Irish. "Why do you ask, Sergeant?"

"We need you to come down to the station and identify him."

"What, like, pick him out of a lineup?"

"No, Mr. Jack, not a lineup. I'm afraid he's in our morgue."

★
Death and I go back a long ways. I saw my first shooting when I was six; stabbed my first guy when I was eleven. And I've been drinking with corpses for as long as I've been drinking. So the morgue's refrigerated occupants don't bother me. Nor do the hard white lighting or the cold. The reason I hate the morgue is that it's in the police station—and not even I, with all my friends and favors in high-tier middle and low-tier high places, can go there carrying the panoply of unregistered firearms without which I never roll out of bed.

Dr. Jason Grenfleur was roughly what you'd expect from a guy who cuts up cadavers for a living: neat, quiet, and a little bit dead behind the eyes. He offered neither his hand nor his condolences. "Mr. Jack?"

"That's right."

The tall, thin doctor stepped away from a table in the corner where a human form lay still beneath a sheet. Walked over to the long steel wall across from the room's one door. "Here, please."

I paced toward him, and he pressed a red button in a row of red buttons on the wall. One of the three-by-three hatches swung open, and a metal slab deployed pneumatically from within. A plume of chilled air unfurled alongside, an

exhalation from Gehenna.

My father's face.

"Is this Declan Morrow?"

I nodded. Cleared my throat. "How?" I asked.

"He was shot seven times, with three different weapons. He wouldn't have suffered much—or at least, not long."

"Any other bodies found with him?"

"You'd have to ask about that upstairs. I have some paperwork for you, but I'll give you a moment."

Unexpectedly human, I thought. He headed to the entry/exit and left the room. The door closed behind him with a double-click.

"Well, Dec—you finally did it. You broke Mama's heart for good. I guess we'll hash this out in Purgatory, you and I. Meantime—I don't pray much, but desperate times and all." I started to make the Sign of the Cross.

Wait.

"Did that guy just lock us in here?"

There, in my peripherals: movement. I turned, slowly. The form beneath the sheet was sitting up.

For a split second, as I reached reflexively for the holster I knew wasn't there, a part of me wondered if Purgatory'd come looking for me. Then I snapped out of it and sprang toward the door. Didn't even bother trying the knob—this was clearly a setup for a hit—but there was a clipboard hanging on the wall with a nice, sharp ballpoint tucked into the clip.

As I turned back to my surprise visitor, brandishing my better-than-nothing shiv, the sheet pulled away from his face, and I froze. Once again, a shock of religious fear assailed me: I had watched that countenance contort with the pain of death. But an instant later, I realized this wasn't quite the same face. A fraternal resemblance.

"Domingo Jack," said the broad-shouldered redhead with murder in his gaze.

"Kor Vipuri. Been awhile."

"Awhile, yes. Has been awhile since you kill my brother."

"I didn't kill your brother, Kor. Hell, we were just starting to get along. Roger Fenton popped him, and Tal self-avenged."

"And you have been sole choreographer on Chase Hardrock ever since. Works out very well for you, yes?"

The Seven Deadly Finns were the second-best fight corps in Hollywood. It was their eldest brother Tal who envisioned the amazing free-fall Jiu-jitsu battle that put The Unmentionables (aka the "Hardrock" franchise) on the map. Imagine the Tom Cruise Halo stunt from *ML:6*, cross-bred with the rotating hallway fight from *Inception*. Sadly for Vipuri, we had a squabble with the executive producer and I, alone, survived. Call me Ishmael.

"All right, fine, you don't need my permission to kill me. Just tell me one thing: who hit the guy on the slab over there? Was it Kell?"

"Do not know any Kell. Do not know man on slab."

"He was my dad, Kor. I didn't like him much, but I deserve the God-damn truth."

He flicked a glance at Declan's features, then back at mine. Nodded. "Condolence, Jack. You will see him momentarily."

"Someone told you I'd be here. Paid off the doc. You can't go into a fight for family honor with lies in your mouth."

"We have contacts in Mob, same as you. I get call from man named Maurice. He tell me you will be here at morgue, unarmed. I do not ask question."

Good enough. I knew Maurice. He answered to Kell. She'd shown uncanny acumen at digging up familial connections; must've learned about Kor's grudge and figured him for a convenient wastebasket in which to dispose of me. Declan was already on her list anyway, so this was quite the thrifty little ploy.

I felt myself getting angry. I let it happen.

Kor put his left palm over his right fist and bowed. "Hyvasti, Domingo."

Now, I haven't outlived my numerous enemies by being good at fisticuffs. I've done it by being level-headed and creatively ruthless, not to mention a damned good shot. But although I don't consider myself a brawler, and will always reach for a weapon first, it's not an accident that I do martial arts choreography for a living. So, still holding the pen like an ice pick, I returned Vipuri's bow—then I roared so loudly something popped in my throat, and attacked.

First target, hands. Clear the thorns, kill the rose. Stabbed him through the left palm—his right fist cracked my floating ribs. Enemy foot stomp—no pain, but the pressure as the arch of my left foot collapsed. I bit off his ear.

Smashing into the desk—cyclone of folders and documents—scrambling on the cold white tiles. His hands, half-crucified, striking like sledgehammers. Bone-snap in my forearm. Somehow rolling to my feet, reeling—back-spin kick, half-blocked, still hard enough to traumatize my solar plexus. Spray of vomit. Blood. Teeth.

"You die, Jack!"

Heard it before. Keep saying it, eventually it'll come true. Need a distraction. Lurching toward the metal wall, slamming into the row of buttons. Fourteen hatches swing open; fourteen bodies slide out.

Vipuri lunging—duck behind a slab—grappling match, two men and a corpse. Dragging me to the floor—clutching at arms and legs—three bodies, four bodies, slither down on top of us. Charnel-house pig-pile.

Dad's face—drive my elbow into it—back of his skull against Vipuri's jaw. Stunning him just long enough. I got my hand on his crotch and squeezed with every joule of power in my being.

A horrible rending groan. Still fighting: hands on my windpipe. I reached up—cupped his face like a lover—

pushed my thumbnails through his tear ducts. Scooping motion, deep inside. He screamed. They came out of his face, dangling from the nerves. Screaming, screaming. And then, my teeth in his jugular.

I stuffed him into a corpse-hole and shut the door.

★
There's a technique that all directors use called, "shot reverse shot." It's when the camera cuts back and forth during dialogue so the audience is always oriented toward whichever character's talking. Film School 101. And right now, that phrase was stuck in my head like a shitty pop song. Ruby Kell just had her close-up. Now it was my turn.

A key from the desk-litter got me out of the morgue, and sheer force of will got me up the stairs. Grenfleur's coat concealed my rips and stains. I peered through the slightly ajar door to the main office, waiting for a moment when the nearest cops seemed occupied, then hobbled as unobtrusively as I could to the exit. No one gave me a second glance.

I was concussed. Everything shook and spun, and every step made me yearn to lie down and puke. I made it to my car, sent out the SOS text message, and drove unsafely to the downtown warehouse we call home.

"Jesus Christ, what the fuck happened?"

"Hey, guys."

Damascus, Sing Ka, Tom Waits, Ma Jack: my team. My family. They got me into a chair, got some bourbon into my hands. I told the tale.

Waits said it first: "Sorry 'bout your old man."

The others nodded. Ma took my hand. "Declan—he was not all bad. The best of him is in you, mi corazon."

"Love you, Ma."

"Te quiero, Domingo."

Silence.

"So," Ka said finally. "What shall we do about Miss Kell?"

"Funny you should ask. Who's got a pencil?" I gave Ma the number for Kell's phone, then looked at our crazy driver. "Hey, Waits. Remember when I begged you not to run over that mob boss and you did it anyway?"

"Heh! Good times."

"Please don't run over Ruby Kell."

"Chick's a pancake."

Ma was setting up her laptop. "Two hours, maybe, to get location."

"All right, let's lock this place down. Full combat readiness."

"On it," said Joey. "You just ease into a coma."

"That sounds nice."

Another damned buzz at my hip. Blocked number. I flipped it open. "Now what?"

Sweet venom: "Hello, Jack."

Every muscle clenched. "Ruby."

"I hear you outfought the Finn. Very impressive."

"You've got a real flair for underestimating your enemy. It's gonna get you in trouble."

Her laugh stood my hair on end. "You're so touchy! It was just a little prank."

"You killed my father." Call me Inigo.

"That was business. And you barely knew the man."

"What do you want, you Satanic whore?"

"Don't be tiresome. I want to talk about your future, DJ. You killed the men who killed my boss, so I'm not obligated to destroy you. See? We can be friends now."

"Yaaay."

"You'll do me one small favor. In return, you'll have the fear of those who hate you."

I felt light-headed. Between the concussion and the hideously waifish allure of her voice, the conversation was beyond surreal. "What favor?"

"I'm going to appear on set with you. We'll let the tabloids see it. Your name has power in this town. I'll add it to my own."

"And what do I get?"

"Exactly what I do. Those who fear me will now fear you, and vice versa. You'd be silly to say no. Oh, and one more thing." Ma's phone began to buzz. I checked the caller ID and froze: it was the number I'd stolen this morning. "McDermott's man made it to the hospital. He didn't make it home."

★
Sometimes weakness is your strongest tool. Pleading injuries sustained in Kell's "prank," I bought us a few days. But I was expected to convalesce quickly, and report to the set of *Unmentionables 3* with the dark lady of the underworld on my arm.

Ma taped my ribs, set my radial bone, wrapped and iced my foot. Ka prepared some kind of ancient Thai potion for my head. Joey gave me a rubdown that was better than a gallon of morphine. And Waits got me a beer. "Here ya go, buddy. We was outta that fancy shit you drink, so I dipped into my private stash of Miller."

"Thanks, man. That means a lot."

As the red sun glided toward the western waves, we gathered on the roof (behind bulletproof glass) to strategize. Clearly, killing Kell would be trickier than we thought.

"We can't seem to get the drop on her," said Damascus. "It's like she's always ten steps ahead."

Waits shrugged. "She's a witch. Everyone knows that."

"Aw come on, Tommy, don't tell me you buy that shit."

"Best not mock my personal beliefs in the workplace. I'll sue your ass."

"Yeah, good luck with that."

"One does hear tales," Ka mused, frowning. "Assassination victims with pentagrams carved into them, and such. And didn't she speak to you on the topic, DJ?"

I nodded. "Somethin' about our guns bringing a lotta souls to Satan."

"Potentially a useful insight into her psychology."

"Gimme a break," Damascus growled. "Her psychology is, she's nuts. Ain't no such thing as magic."

A quiet voice: "There is." Gazing into some ultimate distance, Ma Jack added nothing further.

"Well," I said after a moment, "whether it's real or not, I'm pretty sure Kell believes in it. And that could be why she's so unpredictable. We're used to dealing with people who do bad stuff because they want money and power. Maybe Kell wants money and power because they enable her to do bad stuff."

"Fine," Joey conceded. "How does that help us kill her?"

"Not sure."

"Perhaps a more pressing question is this," murmured Ka: "do we consent to her illusory alliance?"

"Work with the Mob once, they own your ass for good," Waits put in.

"But it buys us time to figure out how to get rid of her," said Damascus.

"I want that bitch on Grenfleur's table," I said. "But we're professionals. We do it when and how it serves our interests. Agreed?"

Acquiescent silence.

"All right, then I say we play along for now. It's not like she wants us to shoot anybody, I'm just gonna walk around with her and let a few gossip journalists tweet about it. Meantime, I want every inch of that set booby-trapped in case she pulls any shit. Everything from harmless snares to Claymore mines. But make 'em remote-activated or something. We don't want the coffee-cart guy getting impaled."

Semper Paratus, always prepared: the old Boy Scout motto. None of us were ever in the Scouts—had our hands full with juvenile delinquency—but we held the high ground in our chosen field because we lived by those two words. And three days later, when Ruby called to politely request my attendance, I felt about as ready as I could.

The set was unusually busy that morning. A lot of new faces. I limped across the lot in my high-end walking cast, chain-smoking, as Ruby sashayed in my direction. She was back-alley beautiful, long-legged and reddish blonde; but her eyes were grey as gravestones, and hid the same presence underneath.

"Jack," she purred. "So lovely to see you again."

"Mutual, I'm sure. Let's go pose for the press."

She took my arm, and an eerie little frisson ran through me. Mafiosos, perfunctorily disguised as key grips and

caterers, slunk along on either side of us, and three or four poofily-dressed persons with cameras—presumably Kell's pet paparazzi—kept pace as well, dutifully snapping pictures. I nodded to Niles Rupert, director, and he nodded warily back. He wasn't crime-connected, but he recognized this woman.

"So, darling, are we shooting today?" she asked with her lunatic grin.

"Not planning on it." A few yards away on either side, Damascus and Ka held the flanks as we headed up to the choir loft. "We've still got some choreography to run through."

The lighting was dim up there. The faux pipe organ loomed above us in the shadows. On either side of the loft was a flight of stairs, but no one followed us up.

Ruby leaned against the keyboard. "Let's chat, DJ."

"What's left to say? You got your photos of us together. I thought that was all you wanted."

"I like your soul. It's strong and it's dark. I want it with me."

What had Waits said about working with the Mob? "Ruby, I work in movies. I'm not gonna be a hired gun."

"It's better than being a maggot-hive."

"But not as good as being neither of those things. Why don't you head on back to your crypt? Even you can't beat a murder rap if you kill us in front of all these cameras."

"Mmm, you're right. It would be much more convenient if your own friends killed you."

"What the hell's that supposed to..."

I trailed off. Damascus and Ka were coming up the steps, one on either side. Approaching unsteadily. Staring. Twitching.

"Guys?"

Kell melted back into the dimness. My friends came closer still, and I saw in their eyes that they weren't there. I'd seen that look many times, in users of PCP.

Breathing harshly, grinding his teeth, almost whimpering in his throat, Damascus sidled up to me. I was armed, of course, but how did that help? I couldn't shoot my brothers.

"Joey, it's me. DJ. Just breathe, man, you're gonna be—"

He hit me with the one-inch punch.

If not for the Kevlar, it probably would've crushed my lungs. As it was, it literally hurled me backward in Sing Ka's direction with my soles three feet off the ground. And in midair, as I came flying toward him, Ka nailed me in the back with a one-inch punch of his own. I was thrown forward again, a miserable ping-pong ball, and collapsed at Joey's feet.

I knew my spine was intact, because of all the pain. But I couldn't move or speak, except to gasp out, "F—fuck." The only word that covered this situation.

Luckily, Ma was watching. I heard her slapping frantically at buttons, and then the Taser-net deployed.

It's exactly what it sounds like. Firing out from the organ,

the net expanded to envelop both men with an electrified mesh and they went stumbling through the loft, bashing into props and one another, until they both fell writhing to the floorboards.

"Domingo!" she yelled in my earpiece. "Estas bien?"

"Yeah," I wheezed. "Whistlin' Dixie." Slowly, doggedly, I climbed to my feet. "Where's Kell?"

"Stairs to your left."

Shaking off the dizziness and pain, I headed for the steps at a stumbling sprint. Kell had just taken another shot at me and mine. It was way past time for the reverse shot.

★

Life ain't like the movies. We all know that. But we tend to forget truth's weirder than fiction, and God gets away with shit no screenwriter would dare to pull. So next time your know-it-all coworker starts pontificating about how John Wick and *Die Hard* aren't "realistic," tell his smug ass about 1st Sergeant Ben Wilson, who killed over 30 enemy soldiers with a collapsible shovel; or Airman Alan Magee, who fell four miles out of a B-17 with no parachute, smashed through the roof of a train station, and was found alive on the floor below. As for me—after getting hit that hard, there was no way I should be up and running. Yet here I was.

I could hear the screams of Kell's men all around me: Ma had activated the flamethrower turrets and was bathing them in napalm. You couldn't swing a cat around here without hitting a fire extinguisher, so they'd all survive (although none of them would have modeling careers); and as long as there were no bodies to explain, the safety commission knew better than to report an on-set "accident" when the Mob was involved.

"Where is she, Ma?"

"Getting away. Is like cockroach. Door to your right."

I hung a right, shouldered through the flimsy door, and found myself on the sound-stage where we were filming the portion of Hardrock's fight that took place on the cathedral altar. It wasn't real holy ground, of course; but it was still jarring to see Ruby Kell standing there beneath the giant crucifix.

"This silly thing," she remarked, as if resuming a conversation. "Two planks of wood and a dead man. My symbol is so much stronger. Four points, invoking each element, and a fifth one to invoke the power of the great spirit below us."

"Tell him I said hi." But as I raised my Glock 18, everything...

Slowed...

Down...

I understood what was happening even as it happened. Kell had found a way to aerosolize angel dust, or a similar

dissociative hallucinogen—and did I detect subtle hints of ketamine for ego-death?—and I'd run straight into a cloud of it. My last coherent thought was, "Pfft, Nolan already did this in Batman." Then the cosmos went red.

Pounding crimson haze—burning gravestone eyes—infinite dark. Two planks of wood—splitting—turning to a ghastly star—fifth point stabbing downward. Figure on the star—still nailed in place—alive and shrieking—Mama. From the eyes—Hell's laughter.

I unloaded my fully automatic pistol into the symbol that held the figure. From somewhere, I heard a crash.

★

For once, it was raining. The endless sunshine in this town, it's like a yellow pit. I heard the rainfall on the roof, and felt a rare smile on my face.

"Hey, look who's awake."

Blinking slowly, I managed to get my lids open. Ma Jack and Tom Waits were sitting by my cot, drinking Jack Daniels. Off to my left, just beginning to stir, Joey and Ka were in beds of their own. We were back in the warehouse, and I'd never been happier to see the place.

"You shoot well, my love," said Ma.

"Back atcha. Wait—what happened to Kell?"

"She got tackled by Jesus," Waits said placidly.

"The hell?"

"Es verdad. You shoot cross. Christ fall on her."

"I'll be damned."

"No. Not after today."

I lay back in bed with a long sigh, letting the tension of the last few weeks start to drain out of me. "What'd you do with the body?"

"Oh, she ain't dead."

Bolt upright. "What?!"

Waits jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Ruby Kell was zip tied to a chair behind him, unconscious and bloody, but clearly still breathing. "Thought she might come in handy."

"For what, scaring trick-or-treaters?"

"Naw, man, look. We spend half our damn time these days fightin' the Mob. What if they was takin' their orders from us?"

"Dude, there's no way we're gonna flip this lady."

He shook his head. "Not her. Her right-hand guy. Maurice ain't bright, but he's loyal. 'Long as we got her, he'll toe the line."

I looked at Ma. "I can't have a dog, but you let him bring home a Mob boss?"

She shrugged. "Short-term fix. When we have long-term, she answers for Declan."

"All right, we'll give it a shot. But first things first." I reached out a hand for the bourbon. "Let's get fucked up." ■



A New Man

By Nicole de Morton

ALFRED STARED AT THE PAIR of antique French flintlock pistols inside the heavy oak display cabinet. *Marvelous*, he thought, reaching out and touching the stocks with the tips of his fingers. Alfred felt the familiar pang of guilt immediately and pulled back, closing the glass-fronted cabinet doors. Even now, almost a year after his father's death, he was still reluctant to touch anything left behind. These things would never truly belong to him.

The house collection was vast. Antique furniture, jewelry, clocks, guns, and all manner of valuables. It had all sat there, largely untouched for years, unloved and gathering dust.

Alfred had fought with his conscience almost daily since his father had died. He had weighed his sense of loyalty against the consequence of living out his days without ever being truly free. Free of the house. Free of the past. The familiar feeling of heaviness returned to his stomach and sweat began to prickle his upper lip. *No*, he thought. *I can't stay here in London. I need to feel the sun on my face.*

Alfred walked carefully down the grand staircase, his fingers grasping the bannister, leaving behind his own unique pattern in the dust. Each step was precarious. Painful. Alfred's knees had long given up their youth and sharp stabs greeted him with every bend. At seventy-four, Alfred had become so used to discomfort, that he'd entirely forgotten what it was like to move with ease.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and lifted the receiver on the old rotary phone, dialing the familiar number. Alfred had never bothered to get one of those mobile phones. He didn't see the point. *Who would want to be available every minute or every day?* he thought, shaking his head.

"William Taylor" came the brusque voice at the other end.

"Hello, Mr. Taylor. It's Mr. Evans here," Alfred said. "I'm wondering if you could meet with me today."

*

I stared through the small, grubby window at Alfred, who looked despairing. Even more so than he had the last time I'd seen him. It's funny how people give up. So easily. As though they never had any fight in them to begin with.

I watched and wondered about Alfred. About what it must have been like to live his life. Alfred was the favourite of his parents. He was adored. Admired. He'd never failed. Never known what it was like to lose everything. To fail at business. To be cast out of the respectable world as a pariah. To be seen as a joke, like I had. No, a man like Alfred would never understand.

This is why I had to do what I was about to do. It was fair and right, no matter how sick it made me feel.

*

"Good evening, Mr. Evans," Mr. Taylor said brightly, smiling widely at Alfred with very straight, almost impossibly white teeth.

Alfred shook his hand and stood back to allow the conveyancer inside. Taylor smelt of cologne, sickly and sweet. His suit was perfectly tailored, and his skin was unnaturally golden for a man who never seemed to leave the confines of London city. *Probably one of those fake tans*, Alfred thought, amused. *These city lads, these days.*

"Have you been keeping well, Mr. Evans?" Taylor said, glancing at Alfred as he began to take papers from his briefcase, laying them out on the kitchen table.

"Oh yes, quite well," Alfred said. "The winter does get into my bones, mind. I'm looking forward to sunning myself on

the beach.”

Alfred lowered himself onto the hard kitchen chair. He kicked something that had been hidden under the table and watched as it rattled and skidded across the parquet floor. It was one of Jefferies’ silly toys. A stick with a felt mouse and a feather on the end.

“Have you decided where you might go?” Taylor asked, not looking at Alfred, seeming not to have noticed the racket of the cat toy and still searching through the leather case.

“I think I might like to go to Italy. It’s a bit more expensive than Spain, but...”

Taylor smiled at him. “You can afford it, now.”

Alfred grinned back. It was true. Once he had signed the deeds, he would have more money than he could possibly spend in the time he had left. He could live an entirely new life.

Taylor pushed the papers across in front of Alfred, placing an expensive looking pen on top. He pointed to a line at the bottom of the page. “Just sign where I’ve marked it.” He looked at Alfred, a strange, nervous expression seeming to dance across his face. “On each page, please, Mr. Evans.”

Alfred held the pen, hovering over the first signature line. He felt a pang of regret. He saw his father’s face, as clearly as if the man truly were standing in front of him, wearing a look of disapproval. Alfred swallowed hard, his throat dry and tight. What he was about to do would have broken his father’s heart.

It doesn’t matter anymore, Alfred thought sadly. He’ll never know what I’ve done. Alfred signed each page, feeling lighter. He pictured the white sand. The bluest-of-blue ocean. He imagined himself reclining on a white, wicker lounge. Perhaps he’d meet a mysterious woman, olive skinned with dark eyes and sensuous lips, like Sophia Loren. Alfred smiled at the fantasy. *This is right, he thought. I deserve this.*

Alfred leaned back in his chair and breathed deeply.

Taylor was grinning manically at him. “Wonderful,” Taylor said, jumping up and retrieving the papers from underneath Alfred’s hands. Taylor reached out his hand, smiling at Alfred. The smile didn’t reach his eyes, and Alfred noticed. “The pen?”

“Oh, of course,” Alfred said, realising he had been gripping it so tightly that his skin had turned white from lack of circulation. He handed the pen to Taylor and pushed himself up from the table, his stiff muscles protesting painfully.

“I’ll have the cheque deposited into your account first thing in the morning, Mr. Evans,” Taylor said, as he shoved the papers into his case and headed briskly for the door.

“Thank you, Mr. Taylor,” Alfred said, wringing his hands. “For making this easier.”

Taylor waved in an offhand way. “Of course,” he said, flinging open the front door and hurrying down the marble steps. “Goodnight, Mr. Evans,” he called over his shoulder,

not bothering to glance back.

“Goodnight,” Alfred whispered back, swallowing nervously, guilt twisting his stomach into a tight knot, tears pricking the corners of his eyes.

*

Everything was signed. Everything was sold. The furniture, the jewelry, the antiques. Everything, except the pistols. Just one more step and it would be done.

I was wracked with guilt. I tried to stuff it down, but that softer part of me wouldn’t stop shouting. Wouldn’t stop telling me that I was making a mistake. It was wrong to kill another human being, it said. Especially one as kind and gentle as Alfred.

I stared through the window again, like I had so many times before, watching Alfred as he cried quietly. I felt nauseous, the bile rising up, sitting just below my throat.

I had to do this. If I didn’t, eventually everyone would discover what I’d done.

I couldn’t leave any loose ends.

Especially a loose end as honest as Alfred.

*

William Taylor sat in his car, sweating profusely. He tried to ignore the guilt that was threatening to overwhelm him, instead rationalising that what he’d done was in Alfred’s interests. The old house was a money pit. The market for it was small and Alfred might have waited years for a sale. William’s offer had been good. He was willing to take the house as is, and deal with the sorting of its contents. Alfred could take his money and live out his life in comfort. Somewhere nice.

William pictured his wife’s face when she found out he’d secured the house for them. For a *steal*. The house of her dreams and all those antiques she loved.

William started up the purring engine of his Mercedes and smiled into the rear vision mirror.

No, he hadn’t done the wrong thing.

Everyone was a winner here.

*

I walked slowly back up the stairs and took the pistol from the cabinet. I felt numb. Resigned to what was to come next. I stood before the small grubby windowed door and took a deep breath, before turning the heavy iron key in the lock.

I stared at Alfred. The real Alfred. My twin brother, strapped to our mother’s favourite Chesterfield chair.

“Henry, please,” Alfred cried, tears streaming down his cheeks. Jefferies was sleeping comfortably on Alfred’s lap, curled into a tight ball, unaware of the danger standing right in front of him.

“I’m sorry, Alfred,” I said softly. “But father left me nothing. He always gave everything to you.”

I raised the antique pistol. “This is right. I deserve this.” And as I squeezed the trigger, I whispered, “I’m Alfred now.” ■

When Your Only *Weapon* is INACTION

Writer Dennis Palumbo gives quarantined writers permission
and perspective amid COVID-19.



By Dennis Palumbo
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With the COVID-19 pandemic in its third month in the US, *Connect* spoke to psychotherapist Dennis Palumbo about recurring themes in his therapy practice, with writers who are under extended stay-at-home orders and grappling with an entertainment industry on indefinite pause.

For three decades, Palumbo has been a licensed psychotherapist for working writers and others in creative fields. To the therapy setting, Palumbo brings his own experience as a sitcom writer, screenwriter and, more recently, crime novelist (2018's "Head Wounds" is the fifth installment in his *Daniel Rinaldi* series). Palumbo's non-fiction book, "Writing from the Inside Out" (2000), was an adaptation and expansion of his regular columns for *Written By*.

Connect: You're both a therapist for other writers and a writer yourself. So how is your writing going?

Dennis Palumbo (D.P.): *I'm a little more desultory because, like anyone else, I feel some of the stress of the uncertainty of this. Plus, you know, dealing with deliveries and putting on my mask and gloves when I go to get the mail.... It's certainly having an effect on my patients. My own writing is going ok. I have patients who are writing up a storm and I have patients who can't focus for more than ten minutes because they're thinking about the pandemic, and especially if they have young children because they're doing homeschooling or trying to keep them entertained. Plus, there's the omnipresent media. I have patients who just cannot stop watching CNN. As this thing has gone on and on, one of the first things I'm recommending to people is to curtail their watching of the news as much as possible.*

Connect: It's a slippery slope between staying informed and getting lost in it all.

D.P.: *Check it in the morning and then check it in the evening to make sure there hasn't been an alien invasion or something. Other than that, I think one of the problems that is endemic brings to this situation is, we have an enemy, this virus, and the weapon we use against the enemy is inaction—just sitting in your house. I think that's very hard on the psyche. We have a fight-or-flight mechanism. When someone throws a rock at you, you pick up a rock and throw it back, or else you run away. And we can't run away, we have to stay in the house, and we can't fight it. So, I think our cortisol levels are always being elevated because we're in a state where there's no tool we can use against the virus, other than staying put. I think the body doesn't like that. The psyche certainly doesn't like it. Therefore, no matter how busy you are, either with your children or with your writing, this sense of impotence contributes to depression and anxiety. And then you add to that the fact there's no end date. Most people don't like uncertainty. One of the real problems with the quarantine is the uncertainty.*

Connect: So much of anxiety is typically about what you invent in your mind, but COVID-19 is a very real external crisis. How does this affect the tenor and substance of your practice?

D.P.: It's sort of like a background hum that's always there even if you're not talking about it. The way most therapy sessions go, the first ten minutes the person talks about how they're dealing with the pandemic—they had a good week, a bad week. But even if we then go into other issues after that, this is always there. People say, "Oh, well, if your patients are writers, they're all used to being alone in a house." Well, 60% of them write for television, so they're used to going to rooms, number one. And, number two, they still want to be able to go out and have coffee or lunch with a friend. So it's a palpable thing that invades everyone's consciousness all the time.

And writers are like antenna. The raw materials of a writer's life is their feelings and their ideas, and the meanings they give to their feelings and ideas. If it's permeated by something from the outside, then you're really going to be sensitive to it. The uncertainty around when the quarantine will end, as well as what life will look like in the future, exacerbates a person's inclination toward either depression or anxiety. One of the hallmarks of depression is the belief that nothing you do will make you feel any better, and how you're feeling now is how you're always going to feel. Because there's no end in sight, it reinforces those two aspects of depression.

Connect: So, it's okay to spend the entire session talking about the pandemic?

D.P.: That 50 minutes belongs to you. A lot of people worry that their careers are going to sputter out and might not come back again. It's the same fears that writers always have during a strike, particularly people who had something that was going. Look at the people whose pilots didn't get made. You go from the elation of getting a pilot script greenlit to production, to a pandemic hitting and, suddenly, no one's making a pilot.

Connect: You mentioned that some of your patients are writing up a storm, and some aren't. What about the added stress and guilt of, "Oh, I should be writing more right now?"

D.P.: For many, many years in my practice, almost always to a person, every writer says, "Boy...if I had the time, I would write my personal novel, or that spec screenplay about Elizabeth the First." Now they have the time, but nobody's writing it. It just runs the gamut. There are people, like I said, who are writing up a storm. Some of them have to because they're working in animation, and animation is rolling right along. But for other people, they're having a hard time focusing.

I'm a therapist, not a writing coach. Whenever someone has an issue with their writing, whether writer's blocks or procrastination or a story point, to me it's inexorably bound up in whatever their personal issues are. It's much more important to look at the underlying issues; the meaning you give it.

Connect: What about practical advice in terms of creative work right now?

D.P.: I do think you should have a structure. You should create a fake structure. The other thing is, and it's really hard, but to stay in the present. Just do what you need to do on a Wednesday. I think if you start saying, "But I wonder, are we going to be able to leave our homes in September? I wonder if my kid's school is going to even open in September. I wonder when production's going to start...what if it doesn't start until January?" All that catastrophizing the future does is create anxiety. And I often suggest to my patients that, your feelings don't predict the future. You can feel like, "Oh my God, this is never going to end!" But that doesn't mean it's never going to end. You can feel like, "Oh, this is going to just put a nail in the coffin of my career!" But that's a feeling. It predicts nothing. And in my 30 years of practice, I've had so many people sit on that couch and tell me, "Well, my career is over." Then, just two years later, they have a show on the air.

None of our feelings predict anything. They're just data on what it feels like to be us in that particular moment. ■

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Formerly a Hollywood screenwriter (My Favorite Year; Welcome Back, Kotter, etc.), Dennis Palumbo is a licensed psychotherapist and author. His mystery fiction has appeared in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, The Strand and elsewhere, and is collected in "From Crime to Crime." His series of mystery thrillers (the latest of which, "Head Wounds," was named a "Best of 2018" by Suspense Magazine) features Daniel Rinaldi, a psychologist and trauma expert who consults with the Pittsburgh Police.

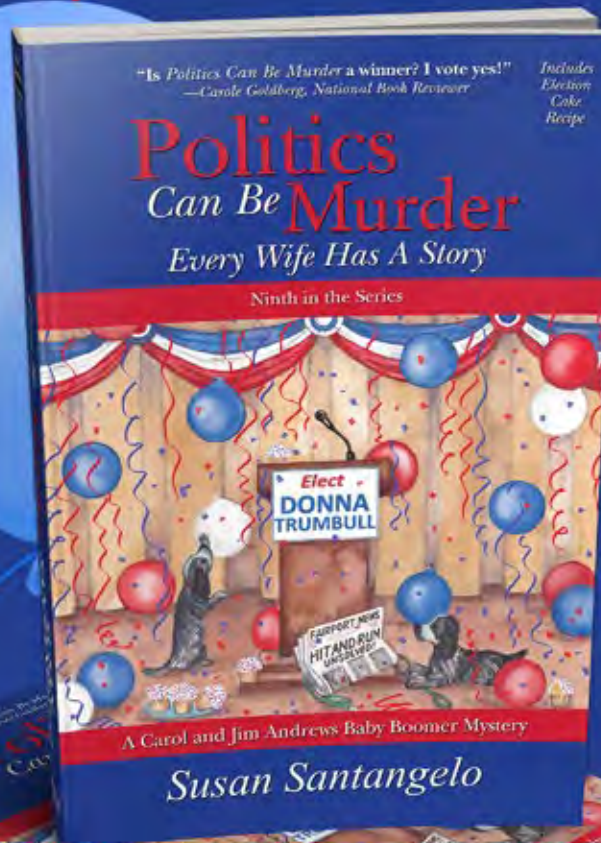
For more info, visit www.dennispalumbo.com.

Every Wife Has A Story

A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

“Reading Susan Santangelo’s books is like taking a masterclass in voice. Local politics, dogs, and the always funny Carol Andrews make the ninth book in the Baby Boomer mystery series, *Politics Can Be Murder*, a clear winner.”

—Sherry Harris, Agatha Award Nominated Author of the *Sarah Winston Garage Sale Mysteries* and the *Chloe Jackson Seaglass Saloon Mysteries*



The hit-and-run death of a schoolmate rocks Carol Andrews’ world. The tragic accident, still unsolved, soon becomes a rallying cry for pedestrian safety in an upcoming town council election. Ignoring the advice of her husband, who points out that she knows nothing at all about the political arena, Carol eagerly signs on to manage the election campaign of a new-to-politics female candidate. But when the always nosy Carol goes beyond her job description and starts asking too many questions, she discovers that politics can be a murky world of hidden secrets, greed, and murder.

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Triple Identity

By Jeffrey A. Lockwood

With a hesitant knock on the office door, Matt Gray startled Jake Anderson out of his mid-morning reverie. Jake's longtime office assistant, Jennifer, had tried to buzz her boss but he'd turned off the intercom while dozing at his desk. Rubbing his eyes, the owner of Anderson & Co. Investigations did his best to appear fully awake for the potential client.

After shaking hands, Jake decided that Gray was aptly named, being a blandly dressed, nondescript thirty-something. "What can I do for you?" Jake asked, gesturing for Gray to take a seat.

Gray sat on the edge of the straight-backed chair across the desk from Jake, looking uncomfortable. "I want you to find out if my father murdered my mother."

"Sounds like a job for the police," said Jake, taking a long drink of his lukewarm coffee and hoping for a caffeine jolt. The sun pouring in from the window combined with a late night of dancing in the personage of Rudy accounted for his sleepiness. To be fair, it had been a couple weeks since Rudy had been out on the town. "Why hire a private investigator?"

"My father, Sylvester, separated from my mother a couple months ago. Last week, someone broke in and killed her."

"And you think the killer was your father, but I gather the police think otherwise?" asked Jake, as he jotted notes in a leather-bound journal.

"Yes, the police have cleared him."

"Based on what?"

"They won't provide their report because the case is still open. But the detective told me they found blood on the window glass that was broken to gain entry, and the DNA wasn't my father's."

"But you suspect him nevertheless. Why?"

"My father was very sick. For years he'd struggled with an autoimmune disorder, but recently he'd been diagnosed with leukemia. He was being treated at an exclusive, private clinic that he kept secret from Mom and me."

"I can understand how illness might stress a marriage. But why would he harm your mother?"

"Before he moved out, he'd become abusive." Gray paused before sharing his dark, family secret. "She had bruises that she claimed were from falling, but Mom was a very graceful woman."

"And you think something pushed your father to murder?"

"His anger toward my mother was frightening, but I couldn't imagine what mental demon was driving him to violence."

Jake sensed that Gray was not entirely forthcoming. However, his years of investigations also led him to understand that he'd pressed as far as this initial conversation would permit. Jake stood up and said, "Mr. Gray, please wait here while I discuss with Jennifer some logistical matters concerning my availability."

Jake went into the reception area and closed the door to his office. He settled into a well-worn recliner and closed his eyes. Other than his therapist, Jennifer was the only person who knew of his condition. During her job interview he'd asked what she thought about working for someone with "multiple personalities"—the common term for Dissociative Identity Disorder. Based on experience with friends, she said that mental illness was challenging but not frightening. After a few months, it was her idea to add "& Co." to the one-man private investigation agency as an inside joke.

Most of the time at the office, Jake was "out" (their term for whoever was present). The others worked with him on cases using their varied talents, but each also jostled gently for time to pursue their own interests. They were not merely personalities but a coterie of complete individuals who shared a body, thanks to a traumatic childhood that none of them could fully recall. They knew about one another in a hazy way that Jake described as a leaky membrane. Their therapist had encouraged "integration" so there'd be just one person, but they decided to maintain their time-share arrangement and let

the therapist help in other ways.

When Jake's eyelids fluttered, Jennifer knew the transition to Tina was complete. The six-year-old was an incisive judge of character and loved drawing, so Jennifer pulled out art supplies and took her into Jake's office. Tina understood she sometimes had to pretend to be grown-up, but it was hard. Matt Gray was taken aback by the impish demeanor of the investigator who asked in a singsong voice for him to draw a picture of his mommy.

When Gray was done, Jennifer escorted him out and said he'd hear from them by the end of the day.

When Jennifer asked what Tina thought of Matt Gray, the girl said, "He told me he wasn't good at drawing."

"And?"

"He wasn't," Tina said with childlike honesty.

"But do you think he needs our help?"

"He's a sad man," Tina said. "We should try to make him happy." And with that, she curled up in the recliner and drifted into a nap.

While Tina slumbered, Jennifer called Gray to tell him that Jake would take the case. She then read Jake's notes, called the San Francisco Police Department, and reached the detective in charge of the Gray murder. She'd successfully dealt with him previously on Jake's behalf, but the cop would only say that, "Physical evidence at the scene was not consistent with Sylvester Gray being one of the perpetrators." Not much help, although his phrasing suggested he had reason to believe more than one individual was involved.

Jennifer went to the snoozing child and whispered that it would be nice if Charlie had some time to play on the computer. A few minutes later, a teenager with an Asperger's-like fixation for hacking was out. Jennifer explained that Jake needed the contents of a case file at the SFPD. Charlie grinned and began hammering at the keyboard. In fifteen minutes, Charlie had the record printing while he registered online for the Bay Area Hackfest. When Jennifer suggested that Jake needed some time to work on the case, Charlie shrugged with adolescent insouciance, slumped down in the desk chair, and closed his eyes.

Jennifer handed the printout to Jake and briefed him on what had transpired. The report documented a break-in at the home of Marilyn Gray. The broken glass of the kitchen door yielded a blood smear. The victim was sexually assaulted and strangled in her bedroom. There was no semen in the victim, but traces on the sheets were consistent with a condom having been used and removed after the assault, which suggested the rapist wanted to avoid leaving incriminating evidence. DNA testing of the blood and semen indicated two different individuals, neither of which matched the estranged husband.

After Jennifer left for the day, Jake brooded over his next step. Getting nowhere, he closed his eyes and relented to Thomas's soft entreaties to attend an evening Mass commemorating the "Holy Twelve Brothers" who'd been martyred in the third century. They weren't biological brothers, but Thomas liked the idea of multiple people sharing the single body of the Church.

Having fasted before communion, Thomas had a late dinner after the service. Dipping a hunk of bread into a steaming bowl of Cioppino, he reflected on the miracle of transubstantiation—the change of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. He often pondered religious mysteries as a test of his faith amidst the modern world of scientific facts.

The next morning, Thomas's contemplation of body and blood seeped into Jake's review of the case. Based on DNA evidence, the police concluded that two people had entered the house and neither was Sylvester Gray. While he savored his third cup of Ritual Coffee's light roast (San Francisco also gave the world Folgers which Ronald, the epicurean personage, considered "an abomination"), Jake wondered whether radiation or chemo treatments for leukemia could alter the DNA in someone's blood without being reflected in a standard cheek swab. It was a long shot but somewhere to start.

While wondering how to locate Gray's upscale clinic, Jake walked through the city until he found a park bench where he could enjoy the crisp, September morning. He figured Mike would love to take a few swings in the park's batting cage. So Jake set the leather journal on the bench and closed his eyes.

After reading the notes and coming up to speed on the case, Mike had a great time smacking 70mph fastballs. His graceful swing drew the attention of a fellow he knew from McCovey's Sports Bar. Outside the cage, Mike rubbed his lower back and directed their conversation toward injuries—and a rumor that the Giants' closer had been diagnosed with a rare blood disorder. Mike figured that maybe big leaguers would be patients at high-end clinics. His well-connected pal hinted that he could find out where the pitcher was getting treatment if Mike would meet him that evening at McCovey's—and bring "the stub."

At the bar, Mike's buddy reported that he'd tracked down the name of the clinic, which he'd trade for Mike's beloved, 2014 World Series Game 5 ticket stub. Mike understood the value of the medical information to Jake, and the heartbreaking deal was made.

Back home, Tina came out well after her bedtime to draw a picture of a baseball player in orange and black to comfort a friend she'd sensed but never actually met.

In the morning, Jake found Tina's picture taped to the refrigerator and "Feinberg-Keck Clinic" scrawled in the journal. What he needed next was access to the clinic's records, so he dashed off instructions for Charlie then laid his head on his arms and let the sun warm his aching shoulders from yesterday's batting practice.

After several hours of increasingly complex tactics, Charlie finally breached the clinic's firewall. He was amused that a ritzy clinic had better cybersecurity than the police department. Charlie copied Sylvester Gray's medical files to Jake's laptop, wrote a self-congratulatory note in the journal, put on his personalized mix of chiptunes, and closed his eyes.

Jake was thrilled to find the downloaded records. He made a bowl of Sapporo Ichiban's ramen, which Ronald had deemed the best commercial brand. While slurping noodles, Jake learned that Gray's doctors had managed to move their patient to the top of the list for a bone marrow transplant. Sometimes you get what you pay for in healthcare. After spending the afternoon cruising medical sites on the internet, Jake had a murder theory—of sorts.

He learned that in a bone marrow transplant, radiation and chemo destroy the diseased marrow before healthy tissue is implanted. The transplanted marrow cranks out blood cells with the donor's DNA. So the blood at the murder scene could have come from Sylvester Gray without matching the rest of his body, including the standard cheek swab. That just left the semen.

Without an unprecedented testicular transplant, the ejaculate on Marilyn Gray's bed had to be from another man. Jake worked until dinnertime searching the suspect's medical files. While leftover lamb tagine from Ronald's gastronomic creativity of last weekend was warming on the stove, Jake found a record from a couple weeks before the bone marrow transplant. The clinic's urologist reported that Gray decided to have his sperm frozen "in anticipation of the adverse effects of chemotherapy on fertility." It was hardly a smoking gun, but Jake figured it revealed a potentially seminal connection. He grinned at the pun.

The next morning, Jake met Matt Gray at the office. Gray looked relieved when the PI appeared to be fully adult in his demeanor.

"How would you describe your father's emotional state before the murder?" Jake asked, getting down to business.

"He was agitated, saying hateful things..." Gray's voice softened to a whisper. "He ranted about my mother committing adultery. Everyone knew she was absolutely faithful, so I attributed his accusations to the stresses of illness and therapy."

"Did he mention divorce?"

"Never. My parents were devout Catholics and marriage is a sacrament."

"Was your relationship to him also troubled?"

"Deeply, I'm afraid," Gray said, shaking his head. "When the doctors proposed a bone marrow transplant, I wanted to be tested as a potential donor."

"I understand matches are much more likely within a family."

"Yes, but he told me the lab results showed that I wasn't a viable donor."

"And that bothered him?"

"It was like I was a terrible disappointment—or even..."

"Yes?"

"Not his son. But family photos show me with my parents since birth. I think the illness was..."

"Changing him?"

"He wasn't himself."

After Matt Gray left, Jake hazily perceived Tina wanting to be out. He sensed that she was worried about Matt, given the empathetic capacity of children. So Jake settled into the recliner and Jennifer provided a shoe box of toys from the filing cabinet.

Tina picked out a set of stacking dolls. She liked the way they nested together and allowed one body to have lots of others inside.

When Tina calmed herself and took a nap, it was Ronald's turn to be out; he spent the afternoon shopping for ingredients and the evening preparing Beef Wellington with fall vegetables and a Mocha Dacquoise for dessert. Jennifer came over to share the decadent feast. After helping Ronald clean up, she gave him an appreciative peck on the cheek and called it a night,

as did her host.

Jake sipped a ginger beer that Ronald had left to soothe his overstuffed belly while ruminating over the next step. Having reached the limits of his understanding of medical science, Jake figured theology might shed light on Sylvester Gray. He left a note in the journal for Thomas, asking him about Catholic doctrine concerning separation and divorce.

Thomas dedicated Saturday morning to reading and praying. After his endeavors were complete, Thomas wrote:

Dear Jake,

The nature of divorce is complicated because some Christians put excessive weight on Matthew 19:9 which says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery.'

Protestants focus on this clause (not found in the other Gospels) to contend that infidelity justifies divorce. This is a mistake. The sacrament of marriage cannot be broken. If a spouse is abusive, a priest might advise separation, but nobody has the authority to break the sacred seal that God bestows on a valid marriage.

—Ad Jesu per Mariam, Thomas.

Over a lunch of reheated Wellington, Jake tried to puzzle together science and religion.

Assuming that Marilyn Gray had been unfaithful, how would her husband have discovered this devastating fact? Jake brought up the medical records on his laptop and found a report summarizing the analysis of prospective donors which concluded that Matt was not only a poor genetic match but noted, parenthetically, that the son “appeared to be significantly and unaccountably different” than his father. According to the oncologist’s notes, his patient insisted on seeing the report and became, “extremely upset by information pertaining to his son. Mr. Gray was advised to focus on his own health, but became so distraught that a psych consult was ordered.”

Jake skipped past files from the hematologist, hospitalist and nutritionist before finding the records of the staff psychiatrist, who indicated that the patient exhibited, “a mixed episode of depression with severe agitation.” He was kept overnight and given diazepam and fluoxetine. Having mined the medical records for clues, Jake decided the next step would be to see what the suspect might have tucked away in his own files.

Jake parked near Gray’s swanky apartment building. Much to his delight, Jake saw the doorman assiduously watching a Giants game on a small television. Across the street, Jake found a bench, jotted a note to Mike in the journal, and closed his eyes.

Mike was soon out and bonding with a fellow fan. After kibitzing with the distracted doorman about the Giants’ pitching while scanning the list of tenants, apartment numbers, and key codes taped to the desk, Mike asked to use the men’s room in the lobby. The doorman nodded and went back to the game, giving Mike an opportunity to slip upstairs and access Gray’s apartment.

Mike rifled through the drawers of an oak filing cabinet in Gray’s home office. He found a file labelled “Family,” pulled out the papers and ran them through the copier. Worried that the doorman would soon become suspicious, Mike slipped back into the lobby. He rubbed his stomach while complaining about bad oysters to cover for his sustained absence and returned to the park bench.

A few minutes later, Jake was pouring over the copied pages, finding bank statements, church records, birth and death certificates—and finally the results of a paternity test from blood samples of family members that had been taken and stored at the clinic. The results were clear. Matt was not Sylvester’s son, so Marilyn had to be, in Biblical terms, an adulteress. Or so it seemed.

On Sunday, Jake turned things back over to Thomas. Science had spoken, and it was time to hear from the Church. Thomas was delighted to attend Mass at St. Sebastian’s, where Matt’s parents had been members. After the service, Thomas told the priest that he had some sensitive questions regarding a serious crime. The old man shuffled into his stately, wood paneled office with Thomas in tow. After a few niceties, Thomas asked about the Grays.

“Would you have any reason to suspect infidelity?”

“They were a devoted couple.” The priest’s forehead wrinkled in suspicion.

“Father, I ask only because this bears directly on a murder investigation.”

The cleric's eyebrows arched in surprise. "Mrs. Gray took confession weekly and never spoke of adultery. I cannot believe she committed a mortal sin and kept it from her confessor."

Thomas knew the Confessional was inviolable, but the grizzled priest had found a way to provide valuable, if complicating, information for Jake's investigation. He'd only revealed what had not been shared and said nothing about what had been confessed.

Jake was distracted during his Monday afternoon session with Dr. Bracco, his—or their—therapist for almost twenty years. She finally insisted on knowing what had him so unfocused.

"I'm working a tough case, and the more I try to reason through the evidence, the less I understand."

"Perhaps imagination rather than rationality would help."

He could almost feel Thomas's joy in the story of the twelve brothers and Tina's delight in her stacking dolls as they relished creative expressions of multiplicity. "Doc, can you imagine how a man could father a child without the kid sharing his DNA?"

"I can see we're not going to make any therapeutic progress today, so let me give you contact information for a colleague at the UCSF Institute for Human Genetics."

The next two days were a whirlwind of science, suspicion and solutions, with a dash of investigatory imagination. Jennifer ushered a very anxious client into Jake's office Thursday morning.

"My father was arrested last night," Gray said. "His lawyer said I was not to contact him, as I was not his son. What the hell is going on?"

"I have good news and bad news."

"There's good news?"

"You're definitely his son."

"And the bad news?"

"He definitely killed your mother."

"But why?" Gray pleaded.

"He thought she was an adulteress and you were a bastard," Jake said with an apologetic shrug for his bluntness.

"Why would he think that?"

"Because a paternity test showed it to be the case. You see, his DNA is consistent with his being your uncle."

"What? My father was an only child. So who did my mother have an affair with?" Gray shook his head in confusion.

"Nobody," Jake answered and began to slow down his delivery in the understanding that the information was hard for anyone to fathom. "The DNA from a cheek swab, which is used in standard genetic testing, indicates he's not your father. But cheeks don't produce sperm. And when the police obtained warrants for his stored sperm, the DNA matched both yours and the semen left on your mother's sheets."

"Now I understand even less."

"Matt, your father is a chimera. When he was in the womb, he had a fraternal twin who died and was partially resorbed into your father. He has his fetal brother's testicles, which produced you."

"But the blood on the broken glass?"

"Also his. Well, technically, his bone marrow donor's blood, but it's his now and the match was perfect."

"So he sexually assaulted and strangled my mother because he believed that she had betrayed him and produced me as a result? What will happen to him now?"

"A jury will decide. I'd guess that his attorney, once he has all the evidence, will argue that his zealous faith combined with the stress of his cancer diagnosis and a witch's brew of medications generated a homicidal rage."

After Matt Gray left Anderson & Co. Investigations, Jennifer came into Jake's office with two mugs of coffee.

"From what I overheard," she said, "Sylvester Gray was genetically three people—his own flesh, his fetal brother's testicles, and his donor's blood."

"Ah, big deal," Jake said, taking a long sip of coffee. "I'm seven people, at least." ■



THE BIG 4

By Will Schifrin

The tiny studio apartment overlooking Huntington Park in San Francisco was perfect. The place was a cheaply carpeted, 450 square foot box with an outdated bathroom and kitchenette, but all that mattered was the view. Nick Hastings looked through the unscreened window at the “Fountain of Turtles” in the middle of the park—a copy of the Fontana delle Tartarughe in Rome. His eyes moved past the sculpture fountain and across the street to the stately, Georgian brick building that was the Huntington Hotel. On the ground floor he saw a mustard colored awning with faded black letters that read, “The Big 4 Restaurant.”

“Is the rent negotiable?” Nick asked the apartment manager. She was a pleasant looking blonde woman with a clipboard, who reminded him of Marcia Brady.

“Sorry, no,” she said. “I know it’s high for a studio, but it’s Nob Hill.”

Nick continued to gaze out the window. He had short black hair, crystal blue eyes, and wore a thin, gold chain with a small cross around his neck.

The apartment manager said, “No pressure, but this place will get snapped up pretty fast. Views of the park don’t come up that often.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Great. And just so you know, it’s no pets and no smoking.”

“Never been a smoker and my dog passed last year.”

“I’m sorry. That’s always tough.”

Nick nodded. “Asher was a loyal friend. But I take comfort knowing he’s with the Lord now.”

The apartment manager hesitated a moment. Religious talk obviously made her uncomfortable. “Right. Of course, that’s a lovely way to look at it. May I ask what sort of work you’re in?”

Nick turned from the window to address her. “I’m a captain in the Army.”

“Thank you for your service.” She let a moment pass. “I’m curious. Wouldn’t you rather be closer to the base in the Presidio? The company I work for manages a couple of buildings in Pacific Heights. I could see if there’s any—”

“Actually, I’m taking an early retirement. I’ve been looking at careers in the Christian Ministry. I’ve served my country for twenty years. Now it’s time to serve my savior Jesus Christ.”

The apartment manager nodded, uneasily. “Well, then, I’ll just have to run a credit check.” She handed him the clipboard. “Can you fill this out?”

Nick moved in on the first of the month, carrying only a large, olive drab duffle and sleeping bag.

He entered the studio and double-locked the door. The room smelled of fresh paint, so he cranked open the window to let in a gust of fresh air. He unfurled his sleeping bag then unzipped his duffle and removed a copy of the Holy Bible, which he placed on his temporary bedding. Nick returned to the duffle and fished out a small wooden cross, a hammer, and a box of nails. He gently hammered a nail into the wall by the window and hung the cross, which was made of

birch and hand engraved with the image of Jesus.

Nick reached into the duffle again, dug deep beneath a layer of clothes, and retrieved a retractable tripod, a box of .300 Winchester Magnum rifle cartridges, and a Remington M2010 Enhanced Sniper Rifle.

At precisely 12:45 PM every Friday, Senior District Judge Charles Alan Winters drove his mineral gray BMW from the San Francisco Superior Courthouse on McAllister Street to The Big 4 Restaurant at the Huntington Hotel. He had a weekly lunch appointment with his CPA, Ethan Leavitt, who also happened to be his best friend. The two men, both balding and in their early sixties, always sat at the same table and usually ordered the same lunch: Classic Chicken Pot Pie for Winters; the Big 4 Turkey Club for Leavitt. They drank fifteen-year-old Glenfiddich neat, asked about each other's wives and kids, talked sports and the stock market, and shared highlights of their week.

Judge Winters was charming and convivial during these lunches, though at the courthouse he was gruff and sour and given to fits of anger. He regularly berated attorneys and public defenders, excoriated defendants, and doled out the stiffest sentences allowed by the law. Winters had made lots of enemies over the years, mostly convicted felons who fantasized about curbing stomping him with steel-toed boots and finishing him off with a Glock.

On Friday, October 3rd, at 12:58 PM, Nick looked through his apartment window and saw Judge Winters pull his car up to the parking valet and enter The Big 4. Prior to moving in, Nick had spent several Friday afternoons at the park, pretending to read the *Chronicle* as he observed the judge arrive at the restaurant at roughly one o'clock and leave at two-thirty to head back to the courthouse.

Nick stepped into the kitchenette and grabbed a slice of mushroom pizza from the mini-fridge, the remnants of last night's dinner. He ate the pizza cold and washed it down with a can of Arizona iced tea. He stepped back to the window, extended the legs of his tripod, and screwed the Remington onto its rail mount. He positioned the rifle in front of the open window (keeping the end of the barrel inside the room and out of view) and peered into the scope. Through the crosshairs he saw the entrance to The Big 4.

Nick looped his finger around the trigger and waited. After a minute or two, his finger began to tremble, and the motion accidentally shifted the rifle a few millimeters to the left, so that the crosshairs no longer lined up with the restaurant's entrance.

Nick was an Army trained marksman and had done three combat tours in Afghanistan. He'd killed several enemy soldiers as a sharp shooter, but the idea of firing at an innocent person on U.S. soil momentarily paralyzed him. He let out an anxious breath, glanced over at Jesus on the wall, and carefully readjusted the rifle scope so that it once again lined up between the parking valet stand and front door of the restaurant.

Time passed. Nick's heart fluttered in his throat like a panicked bird. For a moment, he lost his nerve, walked away from the rifle, and stepped into the kitchen to splash sink water on his face. He dried his hands on a paper pizza napkin and returned to the sniper rifle.

Just after two-thirty, Nick stared through the telescopic sight and spotted Judge Winters and Ethan Leavitt coming out of The Big 4. As Winters handed his ticket to the parking valet, he stepped right in the center of the crosshairs. Nick had a clear head shot. But just then, two women emerged from the restaurant directly behind Winters. The first was in her late thirties, trim and athletic, with rose gold hair that fell over her thin, navy-blue sweater. The second woman was also in her thirties, a few pounds heavier than the first, dressed in a wide brim hat and matching scarf. Nick leaned in closer to the rifle scope, the glass tickling his eyelashes.

He fired...missing the judge completely.

Under the restaurant awning, the woman with rose gold hair fell to the ground. The woman in the hat screamed as she watched her friend writhe on the sidewalk, blood leaking from her arm, which was splayed at an unnatural angle. Leavitt and the parking valet looked on in shock. Winters realized a gunman was nearby and quickly marshalled Leavitt, the valet, and the woman in the hat inside. Two minutes later police cruisers, a ballistics response vehicle, and the paramedics arrived.

The San Francisco Central Police Station on Vallejo Street was in a state of mild chaos. Three desk officers answered restless phones while uniformed policemen and women scrambled in and out of the building. Much of the activity was the result of the Nob Hill shooting earlier that day. Distressed residents called, fearing a sniper was on the loose.

Others claimed they saw men perched with rifles in various parts of the city—Alamo State Park, Hawk Hill, Coit Tower, and the Golden Gate Bridge.

What the public didn't know was that an hour earlier, detectives had figured out the trajectory of the bullet and entered Nick's studio apartment on the ninth floor. They'd found the sniper rifle, the Jesus cross, the sleeping bag, and the Bible. Nick, however, was gone, and law enforcement was on a manhunt.

Desk Officer Anita Chen was on a call when a man wearing a small, gold cross approached her. His hair was damp with sweat, and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Excuse me," the man said. His voice was hoarse.

"Sir, you'll have to wait a moment." Officer Chen returned to her call, "I'm sorry, ma'am, Detective Houghton is out of the office. I can transfer you to his voicemail."

The man standing in front of Chen ignored her request to wait. "I want to turn myself in," he said. "I'm the Nob Hill shooter." Nick held up his hands in surrender.

At the preliminary hearing, Nick looked distraught. Jack Randolph, his court appointed attorney, stood by silently as he recited Bible verses to himself before taking the witness stand. San Francisco District Attorney Scott Barka fired questions as Superior Judge Jacob Bortelli looked on.

"On Friday, October 3rd, did you fire a rifle from the window of apartment 9-J, located on 1197 Sacramento Street?"

"Yes."

"Was your intention to kill someone?"

"Yes."

"Who did you intend to kill?"

Nick didn't answer. Anguished, he covered his face with his hands.

Barka moved closer, placing his fingers on the ledge of the witness stand. "Was it Judge Charles Alan Winters?"

Nick bowed his head in prayer. "Lord Jesus, I pray that through my faith, you will grant me salvation."

"Mr. Hastings, please answer the question. Did you intend to kill Judge Charles Alan Winters?"

"Murder is a sin."

"Yet you set out to commit murder," Barka said. "Judge Winters has many enemies. You're a marksman in the Army. My guess is someone paid you to kill him."

Randolph raised his hand. "Objection. Speculative."

"Overruled," Judge Bortelli said.

Barka continued, "Your salary as an Army Captain is \$7,130 dollars per month. Barely a living wage in this city. I'm sure you jumped at the chance to earn some extra cash."

Nick bowed his head. "I didn't kill Winters."

"No," Barka said. "You wounded an innocent bystander instead. A woman named Katerina Evanston. She'll probably never fully regain the use of her right arm."

"God forgive me."

"Mr. Hastings, you committed first degree attempted murder and manslaughter. You're facing twenty years to life in prison. I'm willing to ask for a lighter sentence if you tell us who paid you to kill Judge Winters." Barka paused. "Give me a name."

Nick closed his eyes.

"Who was it, Mr. Hastings?"

After a moment, Nick said, "Camden Brooks."

Camden Brooks was a convicted drug trafficker serving a fifteen-year sentence at San Quentin. Similar offenders usually got five years, but the judge—Charles Winters—had given him consecutive sentences for possession and distribution of three illegal substances, essentially throwing the book at him. According to Nick, Brooks had found him by Googling recipients of U.S. Army marksmanship badges in the Bay Area. Nick claimed he'd received an unmarked package with five thousand dollars in cash and a note promising another five if he did the job.

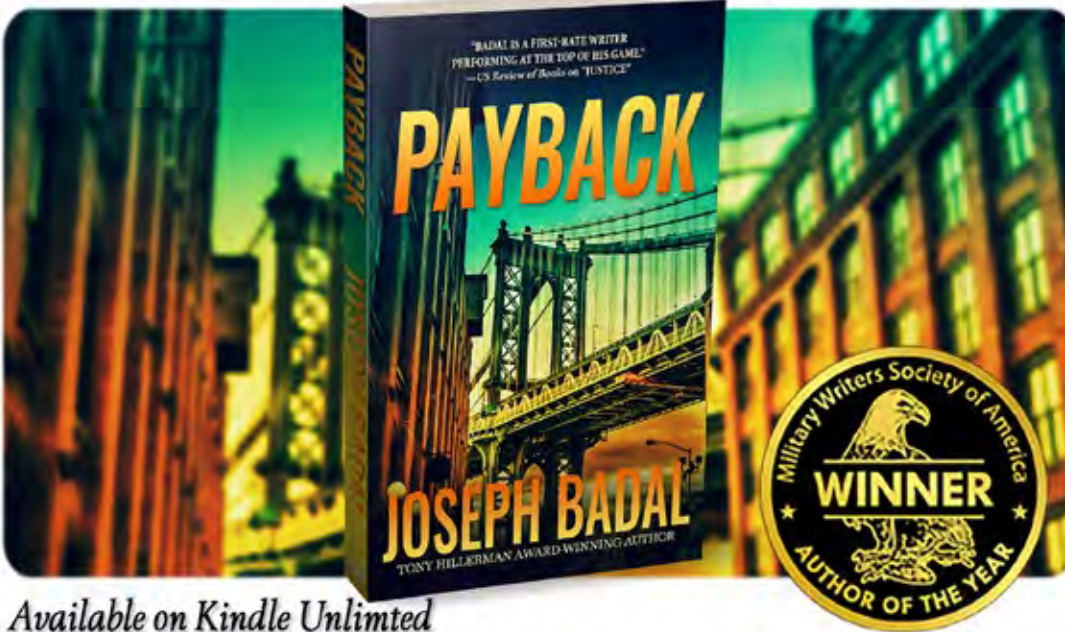
Barka asked that bail be set at \$750,000 dollars, but Randolph argued to lower the amount.



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“Your Honor,” said Randolph, “Nick Hastings is a war hero without a criminal record. He’s obviously a man of faith who is deeply repentant about his actions. He’s an expert marksman who clearly had a crisis of conscience, which is why Judge Winters is still alive. Mr. Hastings has been extremely cooperative in giving up the name Camden Brooks. I don’t believe he poses a threat to the community, and I don’t believe he poses a flight risk.”

Judge Bortelli agreed with him and lowered the bail amount to \$300,000.

As it turned out, Nick wasn’t a religious man at all, though the reduced bail was like an answered prayer. His life savings totaled \$32,000, just barely more than he needed to post the ten percent bond.

The following morning a bondsman posted bail, and by 11:00 AM, Nick was driving a Lexus sedan across the Mexican

border.

Nick yanked the little, gold cross from his neck, broke the chain clasp, and tossed it out the window. He looked over at Katerina Evanston in the passenger seat. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled happily, even though her shoulder was still in the plaster cast.

“How’s the arm?” Nick said.

“It hurts, but I’ll live.”

Nick placed his hand on hers. They’d met twenty years ago, cadets at West Point who’d fallen in love. Katerina was a talented athlete, a tennis player who was ranked 146th in the world. Her career took off, and she left the academy before graduating, eventually losing touch with Nick. But as the years passed, her career waned, and she struggled through an unhappy marriage and divorce. On a rainy day in November, she searched for Nick on Facebook.

They met at a French place in the Mission District and reminisced about school—the West Point barbecue where they first kissed, and a bad play they’d seen at the Eisenhower Hall Theatre. (Nick fell asleep, and Katerina had to wake him because he was snoring.) They felt content and comfortable together, and their relationship reignited with the same passion it had two decades earlier. They fantasized about running away, starting a new life. Trouble was, Nick only made eighty grand a year, and Katerina hadn’t earned money as a tennis player in years.

But she had held onto one thing of value: a four-million-dollar insurance policy on her right arm.

At exactly the same moment Nick and Katerina parked at Tijuana International Airport, a San Francisco police detective interviewed Camden Brooks in a San Quentin visiting room. Brooks was totally confused, swearing up and down that he had no idea who Nick Hastings was.

The detective quickly realized he was chasing a literal wild goose. ■

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

KILLER KUNG PAO

By Vivien Chien

"Killer Kung Pao" brings readers back to the wild world of restaurant manager Lana Lee, the amateur sleuth from Vivien Chien's, *Noodle Shop Mysteries*, as she explains the allure of gray hair to her more conservative older sister, Anna May. "This isn't grandmother gray, it's gunmetal gray," she explains. After a long week of managing the day-to-day duties of her family's popular business, the Ho-Lee Noodle House in Cleveland's Asia Village, Lana plans to pamper herself the next day at the Asian Accents salon. That evening the twenty-eight-year-old also had a date planned with her handsome boyfriend, police detective Adam Trudeau. On her way to the parking lot, having listened to her sister lecture her, she runs into series regular Ian Sung, the Village property manager. This conversation isn't the only distraction to rear up, however.

June Yi, shrewd owner of Yi's Tea and Bakery, kicks off a new investigation for the young Lana when she backs her dark gray Nissan into a pristine Cadillac owned by Millie Mao, noted for her challenges to the restaurant's well-known group of "Mahjong Matrons." While it may seem like a simple accident, Lana suspects their argument at the scene of the crash is only the beginning. Could it be, when Millie ends up dead at the Salon, the recipient of a deadly, electrified foot bath, that June has exacted the ultimate revenge? Lana finds herself snooping another local murder, much to the chagrin of her beau, who is also assigned to the case.

Chien's rousing sixth installment to this series offers an engaging return to the quirky, relatable characters readers have come to cherish and, as always, a cozy mystery for Lana to sink her teeth into.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



CROWNED A TRAITOR

By Kate Callaghan

I've always loved stories that star monsters, especially when those monsters are brought down to earth. When this story started in a monster pizza joint, I knew instantly that I was going to love it. Kate Callaghan's novel, "Crowned a Traitor," was a good read that left me wanting more.

Klara does not want to be the next ruler of Hell. That's a little hard to avoid, however, when your father is Lucifer. She's been training her whole life for the one day when she will rule Hell, but she would much rather someone else take the responsibility. She'd rather be kind to others than torture them. When that isn't an option in her father's mind, Klara knows there's only one thing to do—escape.

Klara wants to go to Kalos, far away from her current home and her unwanted responsibility. But, trying to run away will instantly make her a traitor in her father's eyes. Still, Klara sees no other way to escape her horrible life; if becoming a traitor is what it takes, then she's willing to take the risk.

The journey to Kalos proves far more treacherous than she expected. Her homeland is already full of dangerous monsters, and Lucifer is not going to let her escape that easily. Fleeing to Kalos proves to push her to the very limit, but this tough heroine isn't going to be placed in her own personal hell that easily.

Chock-full of monsters and demons from all kinds of lore, this book is a good read for all those who love dark fantasy and strong female leads. A very good read!

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

THE LADY UPSTAIRS

By Halley Sutton

Find the mark. Get the pictures. Extort the money. Sounds easy enough, right? Murder was never supposed to be part of the job.

Jo is indebted and in debt to her boss, someone who calls herself "The Lady Upstairs." Jo, along with her coworkers Lou and Jackal, have a mission. They have to get Ellen, a fresh-faced starlet wannabe in a compromising position with Hiram Klein, a married, powerful producer. The job takes longer than expected, and Ellen begins to find her personal feelings clouding her work. Unable to separate the two, she feels slighted when Klein won't return her affection. After another encounter, Klein ends up dead and Ellen needs help, so she calls Jo, her handler.

Jo, involved not only with her best friend Lou but also the photographer, Jackal, starts Klein's murder coverup with both of them. When more bodies pile up, she believes she can trust Lou with her life, but can she? As Jo's guilt takes over, she wonders how far she'd really go for money when another case involving a good-looking politician is presented to the firm by "The Lady." Almost pinched by cops on the take, Jo realizes she can trust no one, but also that she doesn't need anyone else to do the job. Now with a target of her own, she has to decide if taking down the bad guys are worth her freedom—as soon as she decides who the bad guys really are.

A poignant, time-relevant story that will have you second guessing your own morals when faced with the almighty dollar.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■



THE HALF SISTER

By Sandie Jones

After the death of their father, sisters Kate and Lauren go through the motions of trying to keep their family together by continuing their Sunday lunches at their mothers' home. A knock on the door at one of these lunches takes things from bad to worse, causing even more stress on the already strained relationships in the family. At the door we meet Jess, the girl claiming to be Kate and Laurens' half-sister, and supposedly, the child that their father had abandoned many years before. Kate, having had a wonderful relationship with her father, refuses to believe Jess. Lauren, however, is more accepting. The sisters have a long and complicated relationship with each other and with their parents; throw in a third sister and the drama heats up.

As Kate sets out to prove that Jess is lying, she risks losing the things that are most important to her. And as Lauren gets closer to Jess, she begins to wonder how much she knows about the past of the person she's so easily let into her home and around her children.

The truth is bound to come out, but will the family stick together to discover it? "The Half Sister" is a compelling and suspenseful read.

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

ONE BY ONE

By Ruth Ware

I don't know if I have ever read a better murder mystery than "One by One" by Ruth Ware. From the very opening pages, the story had me hooked, with tension that kept mounting until I seriously wondered who was good and who was bad in this captivating thriller.

The story follows two women who met at the beautiful Chalet Perce-Neige, a ski resort that people rent for a week at a time. Erin hosts the chalet and Liz visits with a group of people who work for a company called Snoop, which is a popular music app. Snoop is right up there with Twitter and Facebook, but opposing opinions are tearing it apart. With an offer for twelve million dollars if they hand over the rights for Snoop, half the party wants the buyout while the other half does not. It is ultimately up to Liz to decide the fate of the company, and the decision tears her apart.

Before Liz can decide on either side, things start going wrong at Chalet Perce-Neige. One of the main executives goes missing, presumably lost in the snow after a devastating avalanche traps all of them in the chalet. After that, death surrounds the chalet; so much so that no one can be trusted, not even Erin. Erin may have more to do with the people of Snoop than she lets on, making literally everyone in the chalet a suspect in the killings.

This was a nail-biter. I was so shocked by the identity of the killer, that I am still thinking about it. Ruth Ware crafts a wonderful murder mystery that had me guessing until the end. I will definitely want to read this book again.

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



THE LOST GIRLS OF DEVON

By Barbara O'Neal

Zoe's oldest friend Diana is missing. Unfortunately, it wasn't even on Zoe's radar. With a cheating ex-husband, a moody teenage daughter who won't let her in, and a stack of abandonment issues from the mother who left when she was only 7 years old, she has a lot on her plate. It isn't until her grandmother rings her from England telling her Diana has disappeared that she notices Diana's absence. Next thing she knows, she's on a plane with her daughter, Isabel, to help uncover the truth.

Barbara O'Neal's, "The Lost Girls of Devon," is a mystery that will have you perched on the edge of your seat—but trust me, you'll also need an entire box of tissues.

Zoe's plane ride to England lands her face first in front of her mother and her ex-boyfriend, both of whom she hasn't spoken to in decades. Unfortunately for Zoe, there is no avoiding the past when they are thrust together to look for their dear friend Diana. And is the past really put behind them?

Told from the perspective of four different women from different generations, O'Neal opens a door to a heartwarming tale of forgiveness and love through one family. Perfect for every generation, you'll yearn to reach out and hug these women. Lillian, who is struggling to adapt to old age; Poppy, a mother who just wants her daughter back; Zoe, who holds on to her hatred of her mother and love of her daughter like it's her life; and Isabel, who has a heartbreaking secret of her own. All four have one thing in common, they want to know what happened to Diana. And trust me, one chapter in, and you'll be itching to know too.

Reviewed by Rebecca Santangelo ■

RIVER OF LIES

By R. M. Greenaway

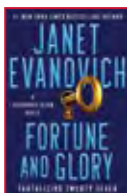
R. M. Greenaway returns to the moody climes of rainy North Vancouver in her latest book, "River of Lies," the fifth entry in her *B.C. Blues Crime* series.

The book opens with a young woman, Tasha, as she braves a cold, stormy evening to get to her car at the Riverside Secondary School. While she has little on her mind beyond a budding romance, there's another presence there with an altogether different, and deadly, purpose. Cut to her dead body and enter RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) detectives Dave Leith and Cal Dion. They may have a body, but they don't have a lot of clues as to who did her in. Was it someone she knew? Her boyfriend, Shaun, perhaps?

A seemingly unrelated case rears up at the same time, creating an intriguing detour for our series regulars. They're called in to investigate the uncanny disappearance of a toddler, Luna Mae, who vanished in the middle of a dinner party. The child's mother, Gemma Vale, suspects her ex-husband's hand in the affair thanks to a nasty custody battle. Not leaving anything to chance, Dion and Leith talk to everyone in the home, including Gemma's stepchildren, two teens named Viviana and Tiago, the latter of whom seems to be hiding something. Constable Judy Temple, meanwhile, picks up the threads of the murder probe. The two investigations soon cross paths and the intrigue, the dead ends, and the corpses grow.

Greenaway's chilling fifth entry comes with twists galore and serves as another worthy addition to her *B.C. Blues Crime* tales and, as a standalone, a gripping Canadian crime procedural. A third plot line, however, is one best left to readers who have read the series from book one, Greenaway's award-winning "Cold Girl."

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



FORTUNE AND GLORY

By Janet Evanovich

It's a typical day in the life of Trenton, New Jersey's favorite fugitive apprehension agent, Stephanie Plum. Stephanie had an unexpected career change after graduating from college, from a lingerie buyer at a local department store, to a pistol-packing bail bond enforcement agent with a very complicated love life. Unfortunately, Stephanie rarely bothers to put bullets in her pistol, leading her and her fashion-forward partner, former lady-of-the-evening (and any other time of day, too) Lula, into all sorts of life-threatening, but comical, situations.

Stephanie is short on cash, so she and Lula set off to apprehend a few felons who've failed to appear for their bail hearings. Stephanie's not paying close attention to her job these days because her Grandma Mazur's new husband, mobster Jimmy Rosolli, has died on their wedding night. The only things he left Grandma were a beat-up old La-Z-Boy chair, two keys, and two of the clues needed to find a life-changing fortune.

Stephanie decides to forget about chasing felons for a while and directs her energies toward helping Grandma find the treasure. Two of Jimmy's former mob pals, Lou Salgusta and Charlie Shine, are also on the hunt for the treasure and have no intention of sharing the loot with anyone else. And these guys don't play by normal rules. Torture, murder, and other assorted crimes are standard operating procedures for them.

Lula has no intention of being left behind as Stephanie and Grandma search for the missing fortune. Neither does George Potts, one of the felons Stephanie and Lula have turned in to the police. Potts has more allergies than are known to mankind, and Stephanie feels so sorry for him that she pays his bond herself. This move turns out to be a very bad idea because Potts has now declared himself Stephanie's protector for life, and she can't get rid of him.

"Fortune and Glory" is a perfect stress-reliever with snappy dialogue, outrageous characters, and a fast-moving plot.

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

WE WERE RESTLESS THINGS

By Cole Nagamatsu

All of us who have been through our teenage years know that just being that age is hard enough. Adding death and a mysterious, evil lake to the mix only makes high school an even more unbearable experience. Yet that's what Cole Nagamatsu puts in her book, "We Were Restless Things," which makes for a good read of angst and mystery.

Nothing has been the same in the small town of Shivery since Link died. How he died just wasn't right—he drowned. In the forest. The only problem is, there's no lake or river, or really any body of water in the forest. People have come up with a lot of reasons as to how he could have drowned in such a dry place, but Noemi knows better.

Noemi has been to the lake in the woods several times, though it's a mysterious place. It seems like it has been there for years, yet she only found it recently. Once more, when Noemi tried to show the lake to the police after Link's death, she could no longer find it. It's as if the lake itself hides when it doesn't want to be seen.

The mystery keeps building for Noemi. She keeps receiving texts from Link, even though he is most-assuredly dead. The more she explores the lake, the harder it becomes to leave each time, and mysterious creatures keep appearing in the water. Noemi's not only going to find out just how Link died, but with the help of some of her friends, she's going to learn and accept herself along the way.

This book felt like a love letter to high schoolers trying to find themselves and the scary lake apparitions only made it that more enjoyable of a read. One of the bravest debuts I have ever read.

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



MURDER IN THE PIAZZA

By Jen Collins Moore

Maggie White and her husband Burt have temporarily relocated to Rome, Italy, for Burt's job. The timing is great for Maggie, she was recently "downsized" from her own corporate job and is still licking her wounds. After spending time in the company of several other women in Rome's expat community, Maggie is bored stiff. So she takes a job as assistant to Lord Philip Walpole, the aristocratic founder of Masterpiece Tours, which offers exclusive painting holidays to small groups of wealthy Americans. It only takes a few days for Maggie to realize that, despite the fact the company is housed in Lord Philip's 19th century palace on the Piazza Navona and she's becoming immersed in the charms of the Eternal City, Lord Philip is the worst boss she's ever had. She wants to quit, but since her husband was against her taking the job in the first place, she decides she has to stick it out.

The current tour group is on the terrace at the palazzo, enjoying fireworks bursting over the Colosseum in honor of "Natale di Roma," Rome's birthday, when Maggie realizes Lord Philip isn't with them. Puzzled by her boss's absence, she searches for him and discovers he has been shot dead in his office. She calls the police, and when Inspector Orsini arrives, he's already decided that Lord Philip was killed as part of a robbery. Maggie knows that she's innocent, but she's not so sure about the others, especially since several of them disappeared from the terrace for short periods of time during the fireworks.

Maggie decides to snoop around and discovers several clues about the murder. But when she brings the information to Orsini, he tells her he's been ordered to close the case. Immediately.

"Murder in the Piazza" combines a well-constructed plot with a likeable protagonist and captures the flavor and history of the Eternal City. It's a delightful visit to Rome without a passport! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



BURIED

By Lynda La Plante

This story is British, so they don't make distinctions between police procedurals, suspense, and straight mystery. They call everything crime fiction. That's just as well for this volume, since, for this American, it's a bit of all of these.

There is a police officer, DC Jack Warr, who wants to find a career that he can be passionate about and doesn't think this is it. There is also an old crime, two of them, actually. A diamond theft and a train robbery, both of them never solved. The diamonds and the cash vanished.

The book opens after a glimpse at a meeting in the past of some principal players, all female ex-cons, with a combination of murder, arson, and robbery on their resumes, at Rose Cottage. A body, badly burnt, but not killed by the fire, is found inside, along with remnants of cash recognizable as being from the heist.

On a personal front, Jack's adoptive father is dying of cancer just as he is getting leads, through this present-day fire and murder, as to who his biological father might be. He has never known this and feels incomplete without that knowledge. His physician romantic partner, Maggie, is frustrated that Jack seems to be concentrating more on the trail to his real, criminal father, than on his dying father, and on his job.

Through this exquisitely detailed inside look at British crime solving, we see Jack having moments of brilliance and moments of despair as he comes ever closer to tying all these loose ends together and arriving at the truth.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

DIGGING UP THE REMAINS

By Julia Henry

Lilly Jayne can always be depended upon when it comes to supporting community projects in her hometown of Goosebush, Massachusetts. Her family roots in Goosebush go back generations. So it's no surprise that she's on the planning committee for the town's 400th Anniversary, which will also include a Fall Festival 10k fundraiser. But when the committee decides the celebration should also include hosting a haunted house on her lawn, she's very hesitant.

To add to her discomfort, there's a nosy reporter in town, Tyler Crane, who's been spending lots of time talking to local residents and doing his best to find Goosebush secrets to post on his widely read social media blog. The posts are nothing that could be specifically called libel. Instead, they're nasty little hints with no names mentioned, but everyone in Goosebush immediately knows exactly who he's talking about.

Lilly's privacy is violated when one of Tyler's early posts is obviously about her. With the support of her friends, she takes the high road and ignores it. But when Tyler posts even nastier, hurtful ones about other people in town, Lilly becomes increasingly concerned. She knows that a few of the posts involve vulnerable friends who've come back home to Goosebush after suffering a traumatic event, determined to rebuild their lives.

The morning of the 10k fundraiser, Lilly and her friends Delia and Roddy check the route in advance to clear it from any debris so the runners won't slip. They're shocked to discover Tyler's dead body hidden under a pile of leaves. The police determine it's murder, and the suspect list is a long one. But Tyler's sudden death doesn't stop the nasty posts from coming, which adds to the mystery.

"Digging Up the Remains" is an excellent example of cozy writing at its best, with a cast of likeable characters and a well-written, logical plot. I can't wait for the next one in the *Garden Squad Mystery* series.

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

MURDER AT KINGSCOTE

By Alyssa Maxwell

It's July 1899, in Newport, Rhode Island, and Bellevue Avenue is packed with spectators to view the first-ever parade of automobiles, each of which is bedecked with floral displays. *Newport Messenger* editor-in-chief Emma Cross has a front-row view of the parade, along with her beau, Derrick Andrews, and the paper's social columnist, Ethan Merriman.

One of Newport's many prominent families in residence for the summer season is the Kings—Ella King, the widowed matriarch, her daughter Gwendolen, and her son Phillip. Emma soon spots Philip behind the wheel of one of the cars, with his mother and sister as passengers. Emma's concerned, because it looks like Philip has been drinking. Just as the parade starts, Mrs. King is accosted by Eugenia Webster Ross, a woman who says in a very loud voice that she is the rightful heir to the King fortune. Ignoring the tirade, the Kings join the parade, which includes maneuvering a wooden obstacle course. It doesn't take long for Philip's inebriated state to cause him to crash.

That same evening, Emma and Derrick are in attendance at a dinner party at Kingscote, the home of the King family. All the invited guests are in attendance, but Philip is nowhere to be seen. He finally staggers in late, drunk and singing. Within minutes, there's a loud sound outside the mansion and when everyone rushes out to investigate, they find the family butler, Isiah Baldwin, pinned to a tree by Philip's car, dead. Did Philip neglect to set the handbrake and the car accidentally rolled into the unlucky man? Or is it murder? As the furor grows to arrest Philip for the crime, Mrs. King turns to Emma for help.

"Murder at Kingscote" is another sneak peek into Newport's high society, with great characters and a fast-paced plot. Each book in this series highlights an actual Newport mansion and features many real people from Newport's Gilded Age, which adds to the fun. Highly recommended!

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

THE WATCHER

By Jennifer Pashley

"The Watcher" by Jennifer Pashley is one of my most unexpected reads this year, with an engaging plot and characters that make you feel, likely, exactly how she wanted you to feel.

Officer Kateri Fisher is new to the town of Spring Falls in upstate New York, after being transferred. Her first case brings her to a tiny house in the woods, and revolves around the murder of its resident, Pearl Jenkins. The inside of the house is covered with blood, and bones are burned in the yard next to some of her personal effects. Locked inside a closet is a five-year-old girl that no one knew existed. In shock, the team gets no answers from her, and before they can try again, she disappears from the hospital.

On a dual POV that starts on a timeline only a few months before Pearl's alleged murder is that of her son Shannon, a nineteen-year-old who has been sworn to secrecy about the existence of his five-year-old sister. His mother Pearl has kept them locked in her world of paranoia ever since her husband tried to kill her and Shannon in a house fire when he was three. Shannon's only friend is a strange man who lives a mile away and calls himself Baby Jane, but then his world takes a turn for the better when he meets and starts a relationship with wealthy, older Bear Miller, a real estate developer.

However, nothing here is what it seems. What starts off as a slow burn mystery quickly turns into a raging inferno as Shannon is implicated in his mother's murder, the case of his missing sister, and now there's a dead cop added to the mix. Additional motives are uncovered as Kateri begins to doubt everything she thought was true about her new town. Several twists at the end of this stunner will hold your interest to the very last pages. Another literary masterpiece by Jennifer Pashley.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■

DARK TOMORROW

By Reece Hirsch

FBI Special Agent Lisa Tanchik appears in her second adventure. The author, a male, does a good job getting inside the head of this woman, who is terrific at her job, but is hampered by recurring bouts of depression. She hasn't caught on yet that drinking exacerbates the condition, unfortunately for her. Her mate, Jon Amis, is tolerant of her condition, for the most part.

The story opens with a character, also named John (with an "h"), who has just died of an epileptic seizure, brought on by a glaring strobe light that was installed by a hacker for the express purpose of killing him in his apartment in Columbia, Maryland. Tanchik has been after this hacker for some time. She knows the hacker only as NatalyaX, a person working with ultra-right-wing groups, for Russian interests out of Ukraine, with the goal of deepening the political divisions in the US.

The dead man, John Rosenthal, was an employee of Cyber Com, a unit under the Department of Defense working on cyberwarfare and cyber defense. There is a tug of war over jurisdiction between the FBI and that group, but Tanchik is permitted to work on the case because she already knows a lot about the hacker.

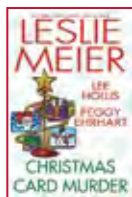
The hacker stays a step ahead of the US forces, however, and disrupts all of the power supplies to the East Coast, causing death and havoc.

The stakes are high as the two women battle it out, online as well as in person, equally matched and equally determined to accomplish their own goals.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

CHRISTMAS CARD MURDER

By Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis and Peggy Ehrhart



Looking for a fun way to get into the holiday spirit? What could be better than a trilogy of novellas by best-selling mystery authors Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis, and Peggy Ehrhart published under a single title with a single theme—Christmas cards?

In "Christmas Card Murder," by Leslie Meier, Lucy Stone has finally convinced her husband, Bill, to create a real master bedroom suite in their Tinker's Cove, Maine, antique farmhouse. Walls have to come down to complete the vision Lucy has in mind, and she's prepared to live with all the mess in order to finally get the master bedroom of her dreams. What she's not prepared for is Bill finding an old Christmas card hidden in one of the walls, with a handwritten message, "You lied and I hope you rot in hell." Intrigued, Lucy decides to investigate, with surprising and bittersweet results.

"Death of a Christmas Carol" by Lee Harris is a modern-day version of the classic movie, *Letter to Three Wives*. Hayley Powell and her friends, Rosana Moretti and Mona Barnes, are setting up the annual Christmas party when they receive a single Christmas card from the town flirt, Carol Waterman. Carol announces she's running away with one of their husbands that same night. Deciding to confront Carol, the women go to her house and find her dead. And all three husbands have a fishy alibi for their absence at the party.

"Death of a Christmas Card Crafter" by Peggy Ehrhart begins when the body of Arborville High School's art teacher and annual Christmas card designer, Karma Karling, is discovered on the first day of the town's holiday craft fair. It's immediately clear that her death was no accident. Is the key to solving the murder hidden in the new Christmas card the teacher designed for sale at the fair?

This trio of novellas is a perfect holiday read.

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



THE DEVIL AND THE DARK WATER

By Stuart Turton

Set in the 1600's, "The Devil and The Dark Water" by Stuart Turton was the perfect mystery. Full of twists, turns and thrilling monstrous scenes, I was glued to all four hundred pages of this book!

Sammy Pippis, the most famous detective in Batavia, has a big problem to deal with. Pippis has recently been convicted of an unknown crime. His bodyguard, Arent, is determined to prove Pippis innocent, even if that means boarding a crowded ship, the *Saardam*, where the passengers are cruel and the sailors even nastier.

But from the very beginning, disaster haunts the *Saardam*. A leper, claiming that a devil named Old Tom is haunting their vessel, burns outside the ship before their departure. None of the staff takes this seriously, though it soon becomes clear that something odd is happening aboard. The leper, who died on the docks, is seen by many, stalking the ship and its passengers. Sailors and passengers alike start hearing a mysterious voice in the night. And unholy miracles commence, painting doom for the entire ship.

Pippis is convinced it's not at all a devil, but a man. But, behind bars, there isn't much Pippis can do to solve the mystery. Thus, Arent is put on the case, much to his dismay. Arent feels horribly incompetent for the job, but lucky for him the lovely Sara Wessel joins his cause, and the two of them work to find out who the devil really is that stalks their ship.

This book was a beautiful blend between historical and mystery fiction. All the characters came to stunning life for me, and the ending left me completely stunned—and that does not happen often! To those of you searching for a good mystery right now that will keep you guessing until the very end, I definitely recommend reading "The Devil and the Dark Water."

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

THE SILENCE

By Susan Allott

A phone call to Isla Green from her father in Australia starts us on this journey to another continent and another time.

Isla spent her earliest years having Mandy as her beloved nanny. Her mother was too overwhelmed by having a child to care for that child. Her mother also hated being in Australia. It was, thus, a complicated, unfriendly relationship between Isla's parents that started spinning things out of control.

Mandy cared for Isla until her mother snatched her away, back to England, in 1967. Now, thirty years later, in 1997, Mandy is missing. And it looks like she's been missing for thirty years. It also looks like Isla's father is the prime suspect for having murdered her thirty years ago.

We, the readers, get glimpses into the worlds of 1967 and that of 1997, gathering information and uncovering layers of secrets that involve Mandy, Isla's parents, and Australia's shameful past. This novel exposed, for me, the horrific treatment of the First Nations people, the ones who used to be called Aborigines. I knew so little about that country, I didn't even know that name had changed, nor what had happened to what is now called the Stolen Generations between 1910 and 1970. It is no less shameful than the way the US has treated our own Natives, and both are histories we should all be aware of.

In addition to the revelations of this fast-paced domestic thriller there is a well-written story of real people, a story I couldn't leave alone until I'd finished this book.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of "Deadly Sweet Tooth" ■

THE HAUNTING OF H. G. WELLS

By Robert Masello

"The Haunting of H. G. Wells" is a semi-historical ghostly love story that pits H. G. Wells against an enemy set on mass destruction. Robert Masello mixes a touch of historical fact with supernatural flare and a romance that will last a lifetime. The famous author may have saved the world in this captivating tale.

Set against the backdrop of WWI, Winston Churchill asks his friend H. G. to go to the front and bring home a recount of the brave boys of the war that will lift the morale of the country. Instead, H. G. is thrust into the trenches of the European battlefield on Belgium's frontline. After surviving a bombing, which drops him into notorious tunnels filled with ghouls, H.G. finds he's brought something home with him, including the ghosts of the men he met on the battlefield.

Jane, his wife, is quite aware of H. G.'s latest paramour Rebecca West. A suffragette, who is so enamored that she risks her life to help H. G. despite the horrific Zeppelins, aka 'Baby Killers,' looming overhead. Rebecca discovers a deadly plot amidst the Alistair Crowley crowd. Thinking he is going mad, or at least mentally fatigued due to the devastation of the battles he has seen, H. G. relies on Rebecca to help him thwart the sinister chemical attack about to descend over Britain. Much to his horror he finds he also has allies from the spiritual world. But can a woman, a skeptical H. G. and a few dedicated ghosts really save a country?

Robert Masello relates a story about H. G. Wells, which is believable and thrilling. The reader is transported visually to a war-torn Britain, where the reader follows H. G.—his life, his trauma and the idea that he may have changed the course of history. The world may never know, but we can believe.

Reviewed by Leslie A. Borghini, author of "Angel Heat" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



ABSENCE OF ALICE

By Sherry Harris

Garage sale entrepreneur Sarah Winston has built a spotless reputation for the way she runs her business. As a former Air Force spouse who's moved countless times, she's a real pro when it comes to organizing and packing. She also has an eye for spotting priceless finds and knows how to display and price items correctly to maximize profits. Sarah also makes it a point to never argue with her clients. But she may have to make an exception for her current one, Alice Krandle, who's arguing that every price Sarah suggests for her items is too low. That's just the beginning of what will turn into the most stressful week of Sarah's life.

Arriving home after dealing with Alice, Sarah receives a shocking phone call from a person who claims he's kidnapped Sarah's dear friend, Stella Wild. He lays out strict rules for Sarah to keep Stella alive. No police contact, no reaching out to her boyfriend, Seth, and no reaching out to Mike Titone, Sarah's neighbor, for help or Stella will die. Mike only uses the apartment when things get "too hot" for him in the city with his underworld cohorts, and has helped Sarah out of sticky situations a few times before.

Sarah thinks someone is just trying to scare her until she receives a call from the terrified Stella. The kidnapper begins to taunt Sarah, giving her a list of things she must do to buy Stella more time. One of his instructions leads Sarah to an empty house, where she finds the body of a dead woman dressed in an Alice in Wonderland costume. To make matters even worse, Mike Titone and his two bodyguard brothers show up to use the apartment for a few days. Sarah is desperate for his help but she can't tell him what's going on.

"Absence of Alice" is a roller-coaster of a mystery that I couldn't put down. Wow! What a read!

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

HOWLOWEEN MURDER

By Laurien Berenson

It's a few days before Halloween and Melanie Travis's to-do list just keeps getting longer. Tops on the list is to find a costume for her young son, Kevin, who's torn between going as Steve Jobs or an astronaut. Then there's the upcoming Friday night Halloween party at Howard Academy, the upscale private school where Melanie is a tutor. She's been "volunteered" to co-chair the event, which is a huge undertaking.

At least Melanie doesn't have to worry about refreshments for the party, since Headmaster Russell Hanover's right-hand gal, Harriet, will be bringing her always popular marshmallow puffs. Oh, and Melanie's household also includes one husband, the handsome Sam; one teenage son, Davey; five purebred standard poodles; and, one mutt, the loveable Bud. So you can see how Melanie doesn't need one more thing to do.

Things start to unravel when Melanie encounters the always unflappable Harriet sitting behind her desk outside her boss's office with an uncharacteristically worried look on her face. It seems that one of her elderly neighbors, Ralph Penders, has just died of cyanide poisoning and the police suspect the lethal dose was in one of Harriet's marshmallow puffs.

Headmaster Hanover is panic-stricken that having one of his staff under suspicion of murder will cast a bad light on Howard Academy and suggests his assistant go on administrative leave. The distraught Harriet knows she's innocent and begs Melanie to clear her name. Melanie agrees, and her first task is to gather all the trays of marshmallow puffs that Harriet has already distributed to her other neighbors and dispose of them.

As Melanie collects the puffs and chats with the neighbors and Harriet's sister, Bernie, who shares the house with Harriet, she discovers that Ralph was suffering from dementia. Plus, several people had problems with poor Ralph's erratic behavior, including his own family.

"Howloween Murder" is a tasty tale full of twisty turns and fun treats. Highly recommended.

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



THREE TREATS TOO MANY

By Debra H. Goldstein

Sarah Blair's new life in her hometown of Wheaton, Alabama is not going well. Her twin sister, Emily, Emily's boyfriend, Marcus, and Sarah are on the verge of opening Southwind, an upscale restaurant in town. But the process of getting all the proper permits is taking forever, all thanks to Wheaton's building inspector, Louis Botts. The irony of this business venture partnership, by the way, is that Sarah couldn't find her way around a kitchen to save her life. To make matters even more frustrating, her archrival in life and business, Jane Clark, who was Sarah's late ex-husband's mistress, has already sailed through the permit process for her own new restaurant and is hosting a huge grand opening. Jane's Place just happens to be directly across the street from Southwind. Is this just a coincidence? Not a chance.

Sarah, Emily and Marcus, along with their friend Jacob Hightower, check out the competition at the opening night bash. The place is packed, and all the food is spectacular. But what really impresses the crowd are all the delicious vegan dishes made by the very talented Riley Miller, Jane's sous chef. The beautiful, blonde Riley is also the object of affection for several of the men in town. Sometimes she's even been known to play one of her suitors against another. Two of Riley's conquests are Louis Botts, the building inspector, and Sarah's good friend Jacob. When Riley is found murdered outside Jane's Place, with Jacob kneeling over her body, he becomes the prime suspect in the crime. The body count ratchets up quickly as Sarah's nemesis, Louis Botts, is also murdered.

"Three Treats Too Many" is the third title in the *Sarah Blair* mystery series written by Debra H. Goldstein. Like the first two in the series, it's chock full of delightful characters with a fast-moving plot that cozy fans will really enjoy. Delicious fun!

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

BOTCHED BUTTERSCOTCH

By Amanda Flower

"Botched Butterscotch" takes us back to the quaint Amish town of Harvest, Ohio. This time, Amanda Flower has delivered a wonderful candy shop mystery with Baily King as the star. I was delighted that she didn't use murder as a backdrop in this story about Mother's Day.

Instead, Abigail's Farm, for women overcoming addictions, has a fundraiser at a local church. When thousands of dollars of donations disappear, Bailey starts sniffing around to find out who is responsible. The reason for the theft is quite surprising when Amanda unveils the unlikely culprit.

This was a fast read. I didn't want to put the book down! 5 stars!

Reviewed by Patricia Wilson ■



15 MINUTES OF FLAME

By Christin Brecher

It's almost Halloween, and Stella Wright, owner of Nantucket's Wick & Flame candle store, has volunteered to organize the local Girl Scout troop's annual Halloween Haunts fundraiser. Because she's a Nantucket native with many contacts, Stella has no trouble finding the perfect location for the fundraiser—the Morton House, one of Nantucket's many antique houses, which has sadly fallen into disrepair. A deserted, boarded-up building on the property, once used as a candle-making shop, adds to the creepy atmosphere of the fundraiser.

When Stella explores the boarded-up building more closely, she makes a terrible discovery; she finds the skeleton of a Quaker woman, wrapped in blood-soaked clothing, hidden deep within a stone hearth. The police are called to investigate. Stella decides to try and identify the long-dead woman and find out how she died. Her search begins at the island's research library, where she finds the name of Patience Hussey Cooper, a woman who disappeared from Nantucket under mysterious circumstances in the mid-1800s and has never been found. Even more intriguing, it turns out that Patience was one third of a love triangle involving her best friend, Nancy Holland. According to island lore, when Patience disappeared, Nancy was racked by guilt and committed suicide on her property.

The police investigate an old well on the Holland property with the help of two Boston University forensic anthropologists. Crochety Gil Holland, known as Old Holly, is the current owner of the late Nancy Holland's house, and isn't keen on having strangers on his property, but he has no choice. Then another body, this one recently deceased, is discovered on the property—making the locals, especially Stella, very nervous.

"15 Minutes of Flame" is the third in the *Nantucket Candle Maker* mystery series written by Christin Brecher. The author seamlessly weaves a riveting, entertaining tale that combines great characters and an intriguing plot with long-ago history and the present day. Lots of fun!

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

CHECKED OUT FOR MURDER

By Allison Brook

Carrie Singleton is settling into her new life as head of programs and events at the Clover Leaf Library and loving the fact that she has reconnected with family. Her life also includes an element that's been missing for a long time, love, in the person of her handsome landlord, Dylan. Carrie's new circle of friends also has one supernatural member, Evelyn—a library aide who died seven years ago and is now the library's resident ghost.

Carrie is always on the lookout for interesting speakers at the library. When she meets new Clover Leaf resident Daphne Marriott who, after a near-death experience, has developed psychic powers, she invites her to do a presentation. The program is interrupted by the arrival of Daphne's ex-husband, who threatens the woman publicly. When Daphne is found dead, the police zero in on the abusive ex-husband as the murderer.

Carrie's personal life also becomes complicated when a company from Hollywood, including her own mother and her much younger actor husband, arrive in town to film a movie. Carrie and her mother have never been close, but when Brianna, as Mom is now calling herself, witnesses her husband getting a little too cozy with his ex-girlfriend, who is also his co-star, she freaks out and threatens the actress in front of the entire cast. Unfortunately, the actress is found dead and Mom tops the list of suspects.

Because the timing of the two murders are so close, Carrie wonders if they could be connected. With the ghostly help of Evelyn, and her own research skills, Carrie discovers they are both connected to a murder which happened in town over twenty years ago.

"Checked Out for Murder" is the fourth in the *Haunted Library* mystery series by Marilyn Levinson, writing under the pen name Allison Brook. I'm not usually a fan of the paranormal, but I love this whole series. I can't wait for the next one!

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



BALLISTIC KISS

By Richard Kadrey

Once again we find James Stark trying to fit in to human society. Although he makes a sincere attempt, he finds it very overwhelming. After being to Hell and back, even the simple act of having a few friends over is daunting for Stark. Richard Kadrey has continued to keep the *Sandman Slim* series fresh and intensely entertaining.

Stark's life is never quiet. The Abbot wants a portal closed in Little Cairo that is letting ghosts run amuck. Samuel wants a missing angel found. His ex-girlfriend, Candy, wants to sleep with him again, and his new girlfriend wants him to refer to her in a non-binary way. Not to mention, she is involved with a death cult with a suicide rush. Stark is not easily fooled by the charismatic group's leaders. He even thinks that he recognizes one of them. His rental house keeps getting destroyed; thankfully, it rebuilds itself. Stark continues to have attempts made on his life, nothing new there, but when one of his own dies and can't come back, that is the breaking point. Stark must go back to his old ways and become, once again, the monster that kills monsters. But, luckily, that's one thing he is good at.

In the midst of all this, Kadrey continues to have Stark grow and mature. It is, after all, the natural evolution of things. Stark has to grow up sometime and maybe even show a little kindness. As Kadrey begins to draw the series to its conclusion, the readers will surely weep. Will Stark finally mature enough to be seen as anything more than a monster? Can he live in a world where he has seen Heaven and Hell, and doesn't much care for either? And can he pull together enough human nature to survive?

Reviewed by Leslie A. Borghini, author of "Angel Heat" published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

MURDER IN A SCOTTISH SHIRE

By Traci Hall

Single mom Paislee Shaw is having a bad day. She's late dropping her son, Brody, off at school and he's being threatened with detention if it happens one more time. When she arrives at Cashmere Crush, her yarn and knitting shop in the Scottish shire of Nairn, she's greeted by a police detective with an elderly man in tow. The elderly man is her grandfather, a person she hasn't seen in years, and he's been discovered sleeping on a nearby park bench. Because Paislee is his only local relative, she agrees to take him until he can find somewhere else to live. While Paislee's still trying to figure out what to do with Grandpa, her landlord shows up with an eviction notice for the shop.

The worst part of her day is yet to happen. Paislee is expecting Isla Campbell, a young girl who used to work for her, to come back that morning and resume her job. When Isla doesn't show up or respond to texts, a worried Paislee drives to her current address and discovers the woman dead. Paislee knows that Isla had a serious heart condition, and a bottle of heart medication is found close to her body. At first glance, her death looks like a tragic accident, and Paislee mourns the loss of her friend.

Talk soon begins to swirl in the shire about the type of person Isla really was. To Paislee, she was a dependable assistant and friend who was excellent with the shop's customers. To just about everyone else, Isla was a manipulative girl who discovered people's secrets, then blackmailed them.

With the reluctant assistance of her grandfather, Paislee sets out to unravel the mystery surrounding Isla's life and death. And in the process, she discovers a ruthless killer who won't hesitate to strike again.

"Murder in a Scottish Shire" is the first book in this promising new series. I look forward to book two.

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



A GARLAND OF BONES

By Carolyn Haines

It's Christmastime and Sarah Booth Delaney is ready to soak up as much Christmas cheer as she possibly can. Presents are bought, decorations hung, and her best friend and detective partner, Tinkie, has arranged a Christmas road trip for them and their friends. Sarah Booth is excited about the visit to the charming Columbus, MS B&B but she's even more excited about the few days of uninterrupted cozy time with the ever so handsome, Sheriff Coleman Peters.

With a warning from Jitty, the loveable ghost that haunts Sarah Booth's home in Zinnia, she packs her bags and off they go in a limo. Things go from good to bad to worse when, at more than one of the holiday events they attend, someone gets hurt. Luckily, it's no one from their circle, and most of the injuries are minor at first, but Sarah Booth quickly realizes that these incidents are no accidents. Although they agreed not to work on this trip, Sarah Booth and Tinkie can't help but take on the case before someone is seriously injured, or worse. A large paycheck doesn't hurt their efforts either, but mostly they just want to find the bad guys and get back to enjoying their holiday. As they begin to ask questions, they come to the realization that there are far more people on the naughty list in this town than they anticipated and it is no easy task for them to finish their job.

An electrocution, a fall—or push—down a grand staircase, two women overboard, and a handful of winter wonderland style activities are just a few things that you'll experience while reading "A Garland of Bones." I showed up late to Carolyn Haines' *Sarah Booth Delaney* series but you can bet I'll be racing to catch up. This was such a fun read!

Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■

THE DEVIL ASPECT

By Craig Russell

Set in pre-war Prague, the author paints a superstitious, thrilling atmosphere of the countryside. Here, a castle sits, now called the Hrad Orlu Asylum. Among others, this place of fear houses “The Devil’s Six”—the most notorious, criminally insane killers of the time—and the villagers are living in a state of fear, harboring hostility toward the asylum.

Detective Lukas Smolak has a difficult task. He must discover the identity of the killer known only as “Leather Apron,” and he has little time, seeing as that the bodies are mounting.

While the detective delves into the depths of a monster’s mind, an up-and-coming psychiatrist takes on his first task; his new position is to interview “The Devil’s Six.” He is determined to prove his theory that the Devil Aspect—a suppressed psychosis that drives the violent to act—exists in every human being. And there’s no better source to use as test subjects than the most horrific killers of the time. Aided by his assistant Judita, a woman who happens to be brilliant but stopped from achieving her full potential as a psychiatrist due to her gender and hidden Jewish faith, the duo hustles to uncover an answer.

Could one of the infamous Six actually be escaping the asylum in order to take out the townspeople one by one; or does the real killer work inside the asylum, itself? Viktor must even deal with an incomprehensible fear, wondering if the assailant could be his closest friend. And while the Devil Aspect appears to be emerging, so does Viktor and Judita’s relationship.

Building to the ultimate, unforgettable crescendo, you will wonder if Detective Smolak can finally bring the perpetrator to light, and learn whether or not Viktor and Judita’s relationship can survive once they come face-to-face with Hell, itself. “The Devil Aspect” is so frightening, the story will burn inside the mind of each and every reader for a good, long time to come.

Reviewed by Leslie A. Borghini, author of “Angel Heat,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

THE KEY LIME CRIME

By Lucy Burdette

Key West food critic, the newly married Hayley Snow, can’t wait to move into her own digs with her handsome husband, police detective Nathan Bransford, when the renovations on their houseboat are finally completed. Meanwhile, the couple is squeezed onto a small houseboat with Haley’s elderly roommate—Miss Gloria. It’s also New Year’s week in Key West, the island is bursting at the seams with tourists, Nathan’s working endless hours, and Hayley’s under a tight deadline to write an article for *Key Zest* magazine on the first Key Lime Pie competition. And just to prove the old adage that things can always get worse, Nathan announces that his mother—whom Hayley has yet to meet—is arriving in town for a spur-of-the-moment visit.

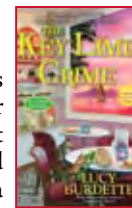
The key lime pie contest gets off to a sticky start when one of the contestants, Claudette Parker, a new-in-town baker, is disqualified by contest host David Sloan because her entry isn’t really a pie—it’s a pastry. And that’s just the beginning of the fun.

Wanting to entertain her new mother-in-law and make the best impression possible, Hayley decides to introduce her to the wonders of Key West with a trip around the island on the Conch Train Tour to see the holiday lights. The trip turns into a disaster when they check out one of the houses privately and discover a corpse decorating the front porch—in a Santa suit. Worst of all, the victim is Claudette Parker. Who ever thought a pie contest could become so lethal?

Hayley has been warned by her husband to stay out of the investigation, and just this once, she decides to heed his advice. But she finds that impossible because her new mother-in-law is determined to flush out the killer.

“The Key Lime Crime” is a delightful read. I devoured every page and can’t wait for another helping of this series!

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



LOVE AND OTHER CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

By Nikki Dolson

Thirteen may not be the luckiest number if you’re in a *Friday the 13th* movie, but for Nikki Dolson it’s just right.

Thirteen stories inhabit the rich, wildly varied tales in her latest literary feast, “Love and Other Criminal Behavior.” We open with her bloody short story, “Georgie Ann,” a drama of lustful affairs and cold, upper class love. The story begins with Georgie Ann’s own funeral, though we soon learn the friends gathered around her coffin are anything but. Love plays into every tale in some shape or form. Topics of race, class, and gender are deftly woven throughout each story, with some more obvious than others. As with any tale of amour, violence isn’t far behind. “Lucy Lucy Lucy” brings us to the tumultuous, hormone-filled halls of a Vegas high school, where young Lucy discovers the bi-racial life she’s living could always be worse. In “The Mistress” we discover that affairs of the heart (even those conducted online) can have deadly and surprising consequences in the real world, as one man finds out the hard way after wooing one woman too many. “Our Man Julian,” is a rousing, darkly humorous tale of an old-time actor from the “blaxploitation” era of 1970s cinema. Julian Adams, AKA Julian Morningside, finds himself playing the real-life role of bank robber and it’s one he’s not altogether comfortable performing.

Dolson’s punchy, fast-paced collection gives readers a fast, and criminally satisfying set of stories on which to savor.

Reviewed by Patrick Whitehurst ■



SISTER DEAR

By Hannah Mary McKinnon

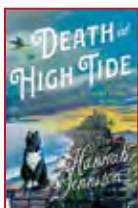
The dynamite beginning raises so many questions, you have to continue reading. There’s no choice. In the end, you’ll be stunned by this dark, psychological suspense tale.

On a snowy day in Portland, Maine, Eleanor Hardwicke is beginning to grieve the imminent death of her beloved father from pancreatic cancer. Eleanor threw herself into her work, website design, after the family got the diagnosis, but can’t help dreading a lonely world without him. He’s been the buffer between her and her hateful, spiteful mother, Sylvia, her whole life. Sylvia degrades her older daughter every chance she gets, in ways both large and small, down to calling her Ellie, a nickname she detests. Sylvia never fails to get in a dig about Eleanor’s weight, hair, lack of ambition or spark. Amy, the younger daughter, is the golden child whom Sylvia calls “My Amy.” She’s in LA, an attractive, rising, talented screen star.

Approaching her father’s hospital room to visit, she is dismayed to hear her mother’s voice, but devastated at what she’s saying—that they have to tell “Ellie” that he’s not her real father. She is left without even the rudder of knowing the only person she cares for is real. Her life becomes a quest to find out who her real father is. That quest brings her to a wealthy society couple who have a daughter about her own age, another half-sister. Another perfect, enviable, beautiful sister. Eleanor longs to be friends with her, to have a sister at last; a real sister. Along the way, she encounters a new friend, her upstairs neighbor, the buff gym owner, Lewis Farrier. With him shoring her up, she delves deeper into the lives of powerful people who might not appreciate what she’s doing.

This is the story of a woman who has been betrayed by those whose job is to protect her, and her attempts to triumph over this adversity, as well as the lengths she will go to in order to accomplish that.

Reviewed by Kaye George, Author of “Deadly Sweet Tooth” ■



DEATH AT HIGH TIDE

By Hannah Dennison

Evie Mead is mourning the loss of her much-loved husband, Robert. Although Robert was many years older than Evie, he appeared to be in excellent health, so his sudden death is a shock to the young widow. Plus, he died right after the couple had a terrible argument. Her guilt over the possibility that she caused Robert's death is making dealing with it even more difficult. Things get worse when she meets with Robert's trusted accountant, Nigel Hearst, to discuss Robert's estate, and learns that her late husband has made several bad investments and died broke. Fortunately, Evie's sister, Margot, has flown in from Los Angeles and is there to lend Evie moral support.

Before Evie leaves the accountant's office, his secretary, Cherie, hands her a sealed envelope. It's addressed, in Robert's handwriting, to "My Darling Wife, in the Event of My Death." When Evie reads the letter, she discovers that she's inherited Tregarrick Rock, a hotel in the Scilly Isles, off the Cornish coast. The accountant does his best to persuade Evie to put the letter aside, but Evie is intrigued. On a whim, the sisters decide to have a relaxing getaway weekend at the hotel, without telling anyone there who Evie is.

Margot concocts an outlandish story for the locals, identifying them as a film producer and a location scout for a possible movie. After a dangerous sail over to the small island where the hotel is located, the sisters are dismayed to see that it's far from the glamorous resort they had hoped for. When two people at the hotel are found murdered soon after their arrival, it's up to Evie and Margot to figure out what's going on before they become victims themselves.

"Death at High Tide" is the first in a new series by Hannah Dennison. It's an entertaining mystery with the right dose of suspense to keep the pages turning. I look forward to reading book two.

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

HELLO, SUMMER

By Mary Kay Andrews

A beach locale, a mysterious middle of the night car crash, a handsome and all grown up boy-next-door, and all the family drama you could dream up are just a few of the things you can expect to find in "Hello, Summer," another delightful read by author Mary Kay Andrews.

Sarah Conley Hawkins has accepted a new job as a hard-hitting journalist for a paper in D.C. when at the last possible moment they lose their funding and she has no choice but to return to her hometown of Silver Bay, Florida. Nothing awaits her there but her doting, although at times pushy, grandmother, her critical sister, their family newspaper, and all of the responsibilities that she's purposely stayed as far away from as possible.

While she works on finding a new job, she visits with old friends and on one fateful night she and her longtime friend Sean Kelly, Skelly, come across the burning and overturned vehicle of a man later identified as Symmes Robinette, a prominent political figure and a local hero in her small town. When her grandmother no less than forces her to write a piece on it for *The Beacon*, the family paper, she must put aside her complicated relationship with her sister, Grayson, and focus on what she does best: investigating.

In a small town like Silver Bay, no one likes an outsider who stirs up trouble. And as Conley begins her research into the life of Robinette she uncovers even more trouble than she bargained for.

Although a great read for any time of year, "Hello, Summer" was the perfect end to my Summer reading. Reviewed by Abbey Peralta ■



A SEW DEADLY CRUISE

By Lois Winston

Jersey girl and reluctant amateur sleuth Anastasia Pollack's string of bad luck is changing for the better after the sudden death of her louse of a spouse. She's found new love with the mysterious Zack Barnes, who may or may not be a spy, and he's just popped the Big Question. Anastasia is thrilled that she'll soon be Mrs. Zack Barnes.

The happy couple are being treated to an expensive Caribbean cruise courtesy of Anastasia's wealthy, well-meaning but totally clueless half-brother-in-law, Ira. Anastasia's mama, Flora, her sons, Alex and Nick, Alex's girlfriend Sophie, and Sophie's father, Shane, are also on the cruise.

The ship has barely left the pier when Anastasia, proudly sporting her engagement ring—a family heirloom which Zack says belonged to his great-grandmother—is approached by an elderly man who admires the ring and asks to take a closer look at it. Later that day, Anastasia spots the man again, and Zack immediately recognizes him as his own father, Emerson Barnes. Emerson was put in prison for the murder of Zack's mother, and it was Zack's testimony that put his father away. The two men have a heated confrontation, and Zack warns his father to stay away.

The adventure continues when Anastasia, Zack, and the gang meet the people they're assigned to dine with during the cruise: Birdie and Orson Gilbert; and Bunny and Dennis Marwood. Birdie and Bunny are twins, and it's obvious that Birdie is very ill. The table is completed by a woman traveling alone, who introduces herself as Lenore Rosedale. The odious Orson immediately starts getting cozy with Lenore.

The dead bodies begin to pile up, starting later that night and continuing through much of the voyage, forcing Anastasia and Zack to put aside thoughts of romantic interludes and solve some murders. "A Sew Deadly Cruise" is absolutely delightful, and I was sorry when it was over. I devoured every word!

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

THE WICKED SISTER

By Karen Dionne

"The Wicked Sister" follows Rachel Cunningham, self-committed to a mental institution for fifteen years to punish herself. She remembers shooting her parents when she was only eleven and was later found catatonic on the side of the road. During her recovery she only remembers certain things: holding the shotgun. Pulling the trigger. Seeing her parents' dead, bloodied bodies.

She's now twenty-six and Trevor, the brother of another patient, wants to interview Rachel to see if she can recover any other memories from that fateful night. When she sees a part of the police report mentioning that there was no way she could've pulled the shotgun trigger at such a young age without suffering damage, she begins to doubt what happened. Furious for wasting so many years punishing herself for a crime she may not have committed, she checks herself out and wants to return to the lodge in the woods where she grew up with her parents and her sister Diana to see if anything sparks a memory.

At the same time, we get a second point of view from Jenny, Rachel's mother, recounting Diana's early days as a diagnosed psychopathic child. After a neighbor boy ends up dead in their pool, Jenny, her husband Peter, and Diana pack up and move to Upper Michigan. When Jenny gives birth to Rachel, Diana tortures not only her but her parents as well, and Jenny wonders if any of them are safe. As Diana gets worse, Jenny finally lets herself believe what she knew deep down was true, that Diana had something to do with the boy drowning at their old home. And when another child near their new home ends up dead, Jenny knows Diana is responsible.

Rachel starts to understand that everything she knew about her past was wrong. As her horrific memories slowly return at her childhood home where Diana is currently living with her Aunt Charlotte, it's a race to see which sister can out-manipulate the other before more people end up dead.

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■

JANE DARROWFIELD AND THE MADWOMAN NEXT DOOR

By Barbara Ross

It's never too late to start a new career, as the recently retired Jane Darrowfield is finding out. Jane's always been good at solving problems in a very discreet way, and people trust her with their intimate secrets. But she never expected that her sympathetic nature and problem-solving skills would launch a new business, much less that her business cards would read "Professional Busybody."

The house next door to Jane's has recently been purchased by a young single woman, Megan Larsen. Jane doesn't know her new neighbor and is surprised when Megan arrives at her office door saying she wants to hire Jane to find out if she's crazy. Naturally, Jane is very surprised, but as the woman begins to explain what's been happening to her since she moved into her new home, Jane becomes intrigued. Megan says she's often awakened in the middle of the night by lights flashing. She's been forgetting things lately, losing time, having blackouts, and hearing voices. She believes someone is stalking her. Jane gently suggests that Megan see a psychiatrist, but Megan refuses.

Reluctantly, Jane agrees to investigate her neighbor's claims, but makes her promise that, if there's no evidence to substantiate Megan's claims, she will seek professional help. Jane does a routine search of the house and finds nothing amiss. But despite the extensive security system she has, Megan disappears, along with her beloved cat. The mystery deepens when the cat is found in a hidden panic room, along with one of Megan's slippers. But there's no sign of the young woman.

"Jane Darrowfield and the Madwoman Next Door" is the second title in what I hope will become a long-running series. It's a great read cozy fans will love, and the ending is a real humdinger I never saw coming! Reviewed by Susan Santangelo, author of "Politics Can be Murder," published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

MURDER AT AN IRISH CHRISTMAS

By Carlene O'Connor

Siobhan O'Sullivan and all her siblings are celebrating Christmas away from their beloved home in Kilbane, Ireland for the first time. They've gone to West Cork to spend the holidays with the family of brother James's fiancée, Elise Elliot, which includes Elise's famous grandfather, orchestra conductor Enda Elliot. Although Siobhan is sad not to be with her own fiancé, fellow garda (policeman) Macdara Flannery, she's looking forward to his arrival the day after Christmas. She's also determined that the O'Sullivan clan will make a good impression on James's future in-laws.

The festivities in West Cork are scheduled to include a Christmas Eve orchestra concert conducted by Enda Elliot, featuring a performance by his latest wife, Leah, who is a well-known classical violinist. The concert will be held in an old mill, and on the day the O'Sullivan clan arrives for the holiday, they join the Elliots to welcome the musicians to town. When Enda fails to appear at the appointed time, there is great concern, especially since Enda is battling early dementia. But no one is prepared to find the body of the cantankerous conductor crushed under a ninety-pound harp inside the mill.

Enda's death seems like a tragic accident, and Siobhan follows standard police procedure and orders the area be cordoned off until the local authorities arrive. She can't resist doing a little preliminary investigating on her own, however, despite the fact that she has no authority to do so, immediately alienating the garda in charge of the case, Barry Cooley. When it becomes clear that Enda was murdered, Cooley decides that Theodore Baskins, the lover of local artist Catherine Healy, is the killer, and refuses to consider any other suspects.

This book is a delightful addition to a consistently enjoyable series. I love the characters, the witty dialogue, and the fast-moving plots. I can't wait to see what Siobhan and her brood are up to next!

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

DON'T MOVE

By James S. Murray and Darren Wearmouth

When I was much smaller, there was nothing I enjoyed more than flipping on the TV and finding the latest horror film. I loved watching the movies about larger than life monsters that terrorized unsuspecting victims. "Don't Move" brought me back to the movies I would devour when I was young, making this an excellent read.

"Don't Move" features poor Megan Forrester, who had everything going for her, once. But, tragedy strikes. After a horrible accident at a carnival, Megan loses her entire family. She lives in a spiral of regret and pain, wishing she could have done something more to save the ones who mattered most in her life.

Megan knows she can't wallow forever; though it is tempting, she knows that's not what her family would have wanted. So, determined to get out of the rut she has been driving herself through, she decides to go camping with the Our Lady of Saints Church group. Though there are some squabbles among the campers, Megan is determined to have a good time and relieve some of her stress in nature for a while.

But, the camping trip soon turns into a disaster. The ones in charge decided to camp in an unexplored portion of the West Virginia woods. Something lurks in these woods, and it is attracted by even the slightest movement. Megan does not want to live through another horrifying nightmare, but now she has no choice. Though the stakes feel much higher this time, Megan is not going to let this end the same way it did with her family; Megan is going to survive, and she's going to save as many of the campers as she can.

If you like movies such as *Arachnophobia*, this book will be a total blast for you! A thrilling read with a fun ending—highly recommended!

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

TAKE ME APART

By Sara Sligar

Kate Aitken runs away from her life. Her sexual harassment allegations against her boss have destroyed her career at a New York City newspaper and she takes a position as an archivist in the small town of Callinas, California where she will organize the papers and photos of legend photographer, Miranda Brand.

Miranda killed herself twenty-five years before. At least, that's the story. When Kate arrives at the Brand home, she receives a chilly greeting from Theo, Miranda's son, and a room stacked with piles of papers for cataloguing.

Theo warns Kate not to venture above the first floor. Is Theo hiding something upstairs? When Theo collects his young children from school every day, Kate investigates the house. She's intrigued when she finds Miranda's dark room, with photos from her last days still hanging on the drying rack. And Miranda's explosive diary, tucked in Theo's bedroom nightstand, enthralls her.

Miranda was a complex artist. Wildly popular in the art world, Miranda's pictures are worth millions. But what Kate learns from reading the diary stuns her. Miranda suffered from mental illness.

The story of Miranda's death makes little sense to Kate. She's convinced it was murder and begins her own investigation into Miranda's life.

Kate spends more time with Theo and his children and a romantic attraction takes hold, as does Kate's guilt about her secret searches and her surreptitious reading of Miranda's diary. As her inquiries into Miranda's life and death spiral into obsession, Kate can't reconcile her relationship with Theo and her duty to uncover the truth about Miranda. But both Kate and Theo discover they are each keeping secrets.

In this artfully written narrative, debut author Sara Sligar expertly portrays the effects of society's treatment of women in a male-dominated world, the effects of abusive power, and the isolating trauma of depression. Readers will experience the intimate slide into mental illness that can distort even the most *normal* of lives, and what it means to know your true self.

Reviewed by K.L. Romo ■

"A visceral tour de force of the PI tradition."

—T. JEFFERSON PARKER, *New York Times* best-selling author

BLIND VIGIL

A RICK CAHILL NOVEL

ANTHONY AND LEFTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

MATT COYLE

"Emotionally wrenching
and haunting . . . a
visceral tour de force
of the PI tradition."

—T. JEFFERSON PARKER

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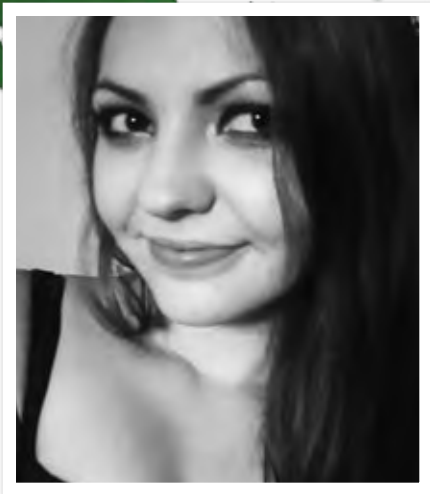
Featured Artist

Interview by Amy Lignor for *Suspense Magazine*

YOANA BONBONKA

*In Bulgaria Lives the Fantastical Mind
of a True Artist*

Dark Christmas



Yoana Bonbonka is a twenty-seven-year-old female born and raised in the beautiful country of Bulgaria. Having worked in the areas of digital editing and painting software since 2007, she has gained considerable experience in retouching, graphic design, digital painting, photomanipulation, and providing stock images for other artists, from musicians to writers. The fantasy style is her personal favorite, but she's extremely comfortable and enjoys working in all other genres as well.

Her work being unforgettable, to say the least, *Suspense Magazine* was thrilled to learn that her unique menu of skills and wealth of colorful talents would be a part of this "Best of" issue. Not to mention, the two fit together seamlessly, seeing as that

she would certainly make a "Best of" artist list with no problem whatsoever. So, sit back and learn about this creative soul, as you also enjoy the view while partaking of this young woman's words and flawless work.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Can you provide readers with information on what it's like to live in the beautiful country of Bulgaria? And perhaps tell our readers when it was that you first knew being an artist was definitely the career path you wished to take?

Yoana Bonbonka (Y.B.): Yes, of course. Bulgaria, located in Eastern Europe, is a small country but abundant with various natural sights—from mountains to forests to seascapes.

I have always loved creating art, ever since I was in primary school. The first digital artwork I did was a photomanipulation back in 2007. At first, I was doing it only as a hobby; it was a way for me to dive into my imaginary world and better cope with the emotional development a teenager goes through. A few years later I got my first commission, and I can't tell you how exciting it was!

I actually never meant for this to be my career. I graduated from college with flying colours, and in a completely different career area. But a few months later, I made the decision that life and art matter more to me than being a GM, so this is how I became a full-time artist.

S. MAG.: Where does your encouragement come from that allows you to create your brilliant ideas? Do you have a muse?

Y.B.: I'm not sure if I have a specific muse that encourages me to create. It's more like an emotional state of mind where I go when I start working. Plus, some meaningful music that perhaps is an artists' best friend.

S. MAG.: When you first sit down to create a work of art, do you have a plan already in mind, or do you create "off the cuff," so to speak?

Y.B.: Oh my, it is always super spontaneous! Once I tried making a sketch and following some plan in my head but, oh...how it ended badly. I think plans are not for us artists, my best ideas come in the process of creating something and they truly surprise me every time.

S. MAG.: Your menu of skills and talents is long. However, is there a specific area or genre you haven't explored yet, when it comes to putting together a piece, that you hope to indulge in one day?

Y.B.: Yes, indeed. I do like to experiment and learn new things every day. Sadly, I never get the time to learn how to edit video. It is a very trendy artform and I would love to try it out one day.

S. MAG.: Even though I'm sure there are many, considering your stunning catalogue of creations, can you speak about some of your favorite pieces? What inspired them and how they came to be created?

Y.B.: *Thank you very much for the kind words; I really appreciate this praise coming from you!*

My ultimate favourite from all the artworks I've done is "The Dragon Keeper." This one was a commissioned piece and the photographer gave me full artistic freedom to do as I saw fit. It was a massive project for me where a lot of time and a lot of effort was invested. It's a mixed media artwork combining photography, photomanipulation, 3D and digital painting. From the moment I saw that magnificent photo 'Mani' that Poplife Photography had taken, I knew it has to be something epic. As inspiration, I believe I may have been influenced by my favourite game, Skyrim, which is all about epic adventures and dragons.

Many more artworks from the last year have made my top ten, as well, including the latest one, "Dark Christmas 2020." It is a very special piece, dedicated to a year we will all remember because a lot has happened. We all have felt afraid at some point; we've felt pain or loss. But in the end, the darkness slowly fades away, so that love and happiness may fill our hearts once again. The piece started out as part of my new stock pack, but very quickly found a heart of its own and bloomed into a separate image with a story of its own. Hopefully one that gives hope to all viewers.

S. MAG.: As a freelance artist, I see that you've done CD covers in the past, as well as other areas. Have you worked with authors in the past on their book covers?

Y.B.: *Yes, I've helped authors with the creation of their book covers. It's a process I really enjoy and is one of my main focus areas for further development. I make pre-made book covers but nothing can compare to a custom design that visually shows a whole story in just one image.*

S. MAG.: What is a great idea/comment or praise that you remember came from one of your fans?

Y.B.: *The one that really impressed me came from a fellow artist. She's absolutely incredible and hearing her praising my skills was so nice; it made my day. It was as a comment she made when proposing my work for a Daily Deviation award on the DeviantArt website. And the other comment that made me so happy was left on "Queen Maria: Wife of Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria" by another wonderful artist on DA called 'pencilprisoner.' It read: "Of all the paintings I have seen, this is by far the most deserving for Daily Deviations. You have set a goal for me and*



Summertime

Model/Photographer Credit:
Sean Maxwell Photography; ElenaDudina



In a Moonlit Glade

Photographer Credit: Wolfe Cottage Studio;
Model/Credit Elle Baldwinson; MUA Credit: Bear MUA



Queen Maria -
Wife of Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria

set a bar for other artists.” At that moment I felt really grateful and also started to feel aware that many other artists get inspired by my art, just as I do when browsing through my favourite artist galleries.

S. MAG.: When a writer gets stumped or can’t think of anything right away, they get “writer’s block.” Is this the same for artists? If so, what do you do to get that fire back to create something new?

Y.B.: Oh yes, it is absolutely the same! Creativity is not something that comes when you push some invisible on/off button. When it comes, it’s time for work! And when it goes away, well...if it’s just a hobby, it’s easy to find other things to do in the meantime. But when it’s a professional work, it’s all about motivation and personal choice whether to disappoint the commissioner or get in shape and finish the work. In my opinion, when being an artist of any kind—visual, literature, crafts, etc.—the talent (muse, creativity) is maybe 5-10% of the whole package. The rest is hard work, discipline, and the desire to grow and refine your skills.

S. MAG.: What’s a piece of advice you’d give to an artist just starting out when it comes to creating and marketing their ideas on sites like DeviantArt?

Y.B.: Oh, DeviantArt...I have been there for more than a decade. (I’m feeling old already LOL.) A lot has changed on that platform. For new artists I can suggest to just be patient and never give up. And, most importantly, to believe in themselves and the work they do. The art community is full of various people, some give praise and others criticism. Both are equally important. A new artist should always seek feedback from fellow artists, and in return give feedback themselves. In my opinion that’s what an ‘Art Community’ is all about: art exposure, skills development and, if we’re lucky, finding good friends there.

S. MAG.: Are there any upcoming events or jobs you’d like people to know about that you’ll be working on in the future?

Y.B.: Yes, thank you for asking! There are quite a lot of new things coming this month. Several stock background packs, PNG resources, some covers and new artworks. Plus, some more exclusive access galleries for fans. :)

It will be so exciting to see the new works this amazing artist produces. Her incredible talent, as you can see for yourself on these pages, makes it clear that she is a leader in any and all artistic communities. To speak with Yoana and walk through her stunning galleries, click <https://www.deviantart.com/bonbonka>. ■



STRANGE NOTIONS:

Where Do You Get Your Weird Ideas?

Excerpt from “Writing in the Dark” (Guide Dog Books, 2020)

By Tim Waggoner

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Janet ran, stumbling through the night, heart pounding, lungs on fire. All she could hear was her own ragged breath and the rustle of leaf and snap of twig as she crashed through the underbrush. But she didn't have to hear pounding footfalls to know that HE was following close behind.

If only she hadn't had sex with Billy, had listened to her mother and stayed a virgin. If only she had remained back at camp with the other counselors. If only she gave more to charity, was kinder to animals, read to shut-ins—

A huge, shapeless silhouette reared up before her, sickly yellow moonlight glinting off ax metal. Janet started to scream, but all that came out was a hot, gurgling sound as the ax bit deep into her throat. Again and again and again . . .

The previous scene is the sort of fiction produced by many beginning horror writers, those who haven't actually read much in the genre and instead base their stories on multiple viewings of *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* flicks. And while such films can have a visceral (pun intended) impact, they don't always make good inspirational fodder for fiction.

Slasher films and their ilk rely primarily on shock. And shock is a Jaycee-sponsored Halloween Haunted House sort of thing. It relies on visual and auditory surprise—some guy in a rubber mask and fright wig jumping out from a darkened doorway hollering “Ooga-booga!” Such effects are nearly impossible to create on the page. They need to be experienced live and in person.

Besides, even if you could create shock effectively in written stories, why would you want to? It's an extremely limited technique. The audience might gasp and jump the first time or two you spring your Jack-the-Ripper-in-a-box on them, but no matter how well-crafted your shock machine is, readers will soon become so desensitized to its tricks that they won't even be able to work up the energy to yawn.

Shock is a quick, easy scare. Empty, and to the audience, ultimately unsatisfying. Readers want horror that does more than go “Boo!” They want horror that disturbs them, shakes them up, that reaches into their guts with cold bony fingers and stirs their wet parts around. So how do you write stories that do this? By crafting stories drawn from personal horror.

Remember Douglas Winter's statement about how horror isn't a genre, but rather an emotion? In order to write effective—and original—horror, you need to dig into your own psyche and find out what scares you, what disturbs you, what *hurts* you. It's what Jack Ketchum used to refer to as “writing from the wound.” Worried that no one will be frightened by the same things you are? Don't be. As Aristotle said, the only way to get to the universal is through the particular. By focusing on your

own personal fears and giving them shivery life on the page, you'll be connecting to your audience—guaranteed.

But you don't need to traumatize yourself in order to come up with ideas to write about. While it's true that the most difficult experiences we go through can make powerful inspiration for fiction, if there are memories that are too painful for you to recall, you don't have to relive them if you don't want to. It's a cliché that artists must suffer for their art, and some people might argue that the experiences we're most hesitant to mine for our fiction are exactly the ones we should explore. And of course, writing about them can be cathartic. But it's your choice where you go inside yourself to come up with material for your stories, no one else's. That said, let's talk about how to use your personal experiences, fears, and obsessions to generate story ideas.

What were you afraid of as a child? The dark; thunder and lightning; the barking German shepherd next door; Mommy and Daddy yelling at each other? Make a list of your childhood boogeymen, and write at least a paragraph about each item. Don't think in terms of story, just write whatever comes to mind. Try to focus on your feelings and what sparked those feelings—remember, horror is an emotion.

Next—and this might be difficult—make a list of any disturbing events in your childhood. Encounters with schoolyard bullies, severe illnesses, deaths of friends and family members. Again, write at least a paragraph on each item.

When I was around five or six, my mother was severely burned when taking a roast out of the oven. I remember her being in the hospital, the doctors taking skin from her legs and back to use for grafts. I remember the watery feeling in my guts when later, after she'd healed, she let me touch the brown patch of tight smooth skin on her palm. The edges were so distinct; it seemed as if I could pinch them between my thumb and forefinger and slowly peel away my mother's borrowed flesh to reveal the moist secrets which lay within.

Childhood is a time when everything is new, wondrous and terrifying. A time when we feel emotions most deeply. And it's those intense emotions you want to summon and use to write your horror. But you don't have to confine your self-exploration to the past.

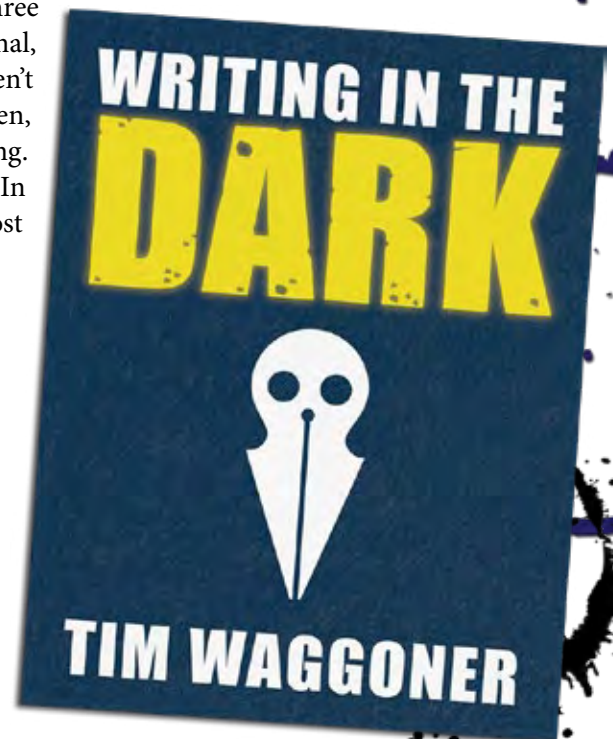
Pay attention to the events in the news which upset and anger you. Collect newspaper and magazine articles and keep them in a folder. Don't merely collect every article on murder you find. Look for stories which arouse an emotional reaction in you, stories which fascinate you.

One of the news stories I've collected over the years concerns an apartment house near Ohio State University which had an electric chair perched on the roof. According to the article, the building's occupants had no idea who put the chair up there and why. It was there when they moved in. As they said, "It's always been there."

Now there's a story waiting to happen!

Another area you can explore for ideas is the realm of dreams. Every morning, as soon as you get up, record your dreams in a journal. A friend of mine in college had been keeping dream journals for years. When he first started, he only remembered having two or three dreams a night. But after a couple years of faithfully writing in his journal, he routinely recalled fifteen or sixteen. And while many of them weren't more than snatches of everyday life replayed on the mind's dream-screen, he always had at least a couple that were quite surreal and disturbing. Added up over the course of a year, that's a lot of potential story ideas. In our dreams, our defenses and pretenses are swept aside, and we are most

“Readers want horror that does more than go ‘Boo!’ They want horror that disturbs them, shakes them up, that reaches into their guts with cold bony fingers and stirs their wet parts around.”



“What do you treasure? Who do you love? Now ask yourself what if these things were threatened, removed, altered, turned against me?”

ourselves. Your dreams are unique; use them to write stories that are uniquely yours.

I once read an interview with Stephen King in which he said he got ideas by looking at something and telling himself that something is wrong with it. You can do this too. Take a look around you and let your imagination run paranoid. Choose a minor aspect of your life or an ordinary event and tell yourself that something is wrong with it. Seriously wrong.

Ask yourself what's most important, most dear to you. What do you treasure? Who do you love? Now ask yourself what if these things were threatened, removed, altered, turned against me? How would you feel? And most importantly, what would you do about it? Your answers to these questions will provide some of your best and most personal story ideas.

Sometimes I base a story on something weird I've seen out in the world. Other times I choose an experience from my past. Often, I combine the two. I keep a list of ideas on a notepad app file on my phone, and I read over it—and over and over and over it—hoping one of the ideas there might suddenly reveal itself as the most brilliant idea for a story ever conceived in the history of the human race.

I get a lot of my ideas from interacting imaginatively with the world around me. I've always had a strong imagination, and I spend most of my time living in my head. So if I see something that strikes me as odd, it sparks ideas. For example, a couple years ago, I found a large wooden stake in my yard. I know the stake was left by people doing construction on the street, but my imagination immediately thought: This was left by a vampire hunter during the night. This is how I think all the time, so whatever I'm doing—taking a walk, reading a news article, watching a TV show—I'm constantly responding to whatever stimuli are around me. I also get ideas from misperceptions. A word I misheard, or something I saw out of the corner of my eye that I mistook for something else. Once when I was driving home, I saw a woman in her front lawn. As I passed, I caught a glimpse of her face, and it looked as if she had the skull of some prehistoric beast for a head, with long, curved upper and lower fangs. I write down these kinds of details because I experience so many of them throughout the day that I'll forget them if I don't. Not all of them become inspiration for stories, but a lot do.

When you walk in the world as an imaginative person, you notice all kinds of weird things, and you wonder at their origins and possible (hidden) meanings. For example, years ago, in the space of a week, I saw two different men walking backward at two different locations. I had no idea why these men would be walking backward. It was so strange! I wrote a note about it on my phone's notepad app, and sometime later, when I was searching for a story idea to use for an anthology, I read over my list of ideas and found *The Backward-Walking Men*. I used that image as the basis for the story.

I try to make my stories unique—both from each other and from what other people write—in several ways. One is by drawing inspiration from the world around me, as in the above example. I was likely the only person on Earth who saw those two men in that week and wrote it down in his phone. Then I combined it with another idea, one that at first might not seem to fit. The anthology I was writing the backward-walking men story for was *Heroes of Red Hook*. The book's concept was Lovecraftian fiction featuring diverse heroes. I made the backward-walking men into one man, and I chose a young autistic man as my hero. His special perception of the world allowed him not only to see the Backward-Walking Man—who was walking backward as he unmade reality—but to defeat him.

I also try to make sure each story has an emotional core. For “The Backward-Walking Man,” the emotional core is that my hero has been treated all his life as if something's wrong with him, that he's lesser. But through the events of the story, he realizes the way he looks at life is special and valuable, and so is he. So I guess my story formula would be Weird Observation + Seemingly Unrelated Idea + Emotional Core. If I can nail down those three things, I can usually come up with what I hope is a decent story.

In the end, it's simple: If you want to write truly effective horror, don't merely recycle the imaginings of others. Write the stories only *you* can tell. And in the process, scare the crap out of the rest of us. ■

Bestselling author Tim Waggoner has published close to fifty novels and seven collections of short stories. He writes original dark fantasy and horror, as well as media tie-ins, and he's recently released a book on writing horror fiction called “Writing in the Dark.” He's won the Bram Stoker Award and been a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award, the Scribe Award, and the Splatterpunk Award. He's also a full-time tenured professor who teaches creative writing and composition at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio.

A CAIN/HARPER THRILLER: #2

"PRIOR BAD ACTS PREDICT FUTURE BAD ACTS."

—Harper McCoy

Fear grips an isolated mountain town after drug dealer Dalton Southwell kills a rogue dealer and his entire family. Score settled; message delivered. But Dalton's best-laid plans go awry when his brother Dennie takes a bullet in the gut. In a panic, Dr. Buck Buckner is kidnapped from the local ER, a pharmacy is robbed and the owner murdered, and the killers melt into the rugged Tennessee hills. Buck's physician father calls in Bobby Cain and Harper McCoy to rescue his son from killers who would have little use for him after he saves Dennie; or worse, the wounded man dies. But which direction and how far did they run? What hideaway did they burrow into? For Cain and Harper it's a race against time to locate the killers, safely retrieve Buck, and settle their own score.



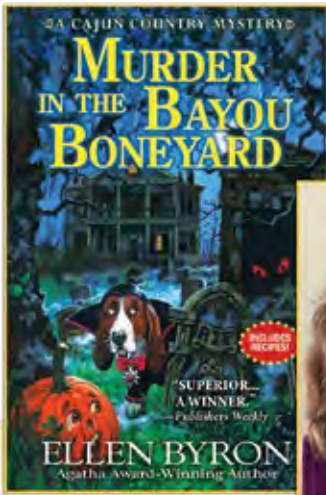
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COZY BEST OF 2020



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“MURDER IN THE BAYOU BONEYARD” by Ellen Byron (Crooked Lane Books; September 8, 2020): Maggie Crozat, proprietor of a historic Cajun Country B&B, prefers to let the good times roll. But hard times rock her hostelry when a new cell phone app makes it easy for locals to rent their spare rooms to tourists. With October—and Halloween—quickly approaching, she conjures up a witch-crafty marketing scheme to draw visitors to Pelican, Louisiana.

Five local plantation B&Bs host “Pelican’s Spooky Past” packages, featuring regional crafts, unique menus, and a pet costume parade. Topping it off, the derelict Dupois Cemetery is the suitably sepulchral setting for the spine-chilling play, *Resurrection of a Spirit*. But all the witchcraft has inevitably conjured something: her B&B guests are being terrified out of town by sightings of the legendary rougarou, a cross between a werewolf and vampire.

When, in the Dupois Cemetery, someone costumed as a rougarou stumbles onstage during the play and promptly gives up the ghost—the rougarou mask having been poisoned with strychnine—Maggie is on the case. But as more murders stack up, Maggie fears that Pelican’s spooky

past has nothing on its bloodcurdling present.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Ellen Byron (E.B.): *I have three books launching, which totally stuns me. (LOL). “Cajun Kiss of Death” will be the seventh Cajun Country Mystery. And two books are coming out in the Catering Hall Mysteries, which I write under the pen name, Maria DiRico—which happens to be my late nonna’s maiden name. “Long Island Iced Tina” launches February 23rd and “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Murder” will be out in the fall.*

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

E.B.: *It means a ton to me because it’s a reader-voted award. I love you, readers!!! MWUA! (That’s a virtual kiss.)*

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

E.B.: *Wonder Woman, of course! The one special gift she has that I’d love to borrow sometime is her height. I’m 5’2” (on a good day), and I’d love to see what life would be like if I had another six to eight inches on me. ■*

“JANE DARROWFIELD, PROFESSIONAL BUSYBODY” by Barbara Ross (Kensington; June 30, 2020): Jane Darrowfield is a year into her retirement, and she’s already traveled and planted a garden. She’s organized her photos, her recipes, and her spices. The statistics suggest she has at least a few more decades ahead of her, so she better find something

to do...

JANE DARROWFIELD, PROFESSIONAL BUSYBODY

After Jane helps a friend with a sticky personal problem, word starts to spread around her bridge club—and then around all of West Cambridge, Massachusetts—that she’s the ‘go-to’ girl for situations that need discreet fixing. Soon she has her first paid assignment—the director of a 55-and-over condo community needs her to de-escalate hostilities among the residents. As Jane discovers after moving in for her undercover assignment, the mature set can be as immature as any high schoolers, and war is breaking out between cliques.

It seems she might make some progress—until one of the aging “popular kids” is bludgeoned to death with a golf club. And though the automatic sprinklers have washed away much of the evidence, Jane’s on course to find out whodunit.



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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Barbara Ross (B.R.): *2021 is shaping up to be an exciting year. “Shucked Apart,” my ninth Maine Clambake Mystery, releases in March. “Halloween Party Murder,” a collection of three novellas by Leslie Meier, Lee Hollis, and me, will be published in September. And, finally, “Jane Darrowfield and the Madwoman Next Door,” the sequel to “Jane Darrowfield, Professional Busybody,” goes into wide release in October.*

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

B.R.: *We’ve all had the dream where we can fly, right? Actually, I’m more of a flying squirrel, moving across distances from branch to branch. But I think the best superhero trait for a writer would be invisibility. Oh, to be a fly on the wall. Or maybe the best trait would be to actually be a fly on the wall, though that feels dangerous, what with the prevalence of fly swatters, rolled up newspapers and such.*

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

B.R.: *A much saner person. ■*



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Provided by Author



“SNOWED UNDER” by Mary Feliz (Lyrical Press; June 9, 2020): When professional organizer Maggie McDonald finds a body in a snowdrift outside her friend’s ski cabin, she must plow through the clues to find a cold-blooded killer...

Lake Tahoe in February is beautiful, but Maggie can’t see a thing as she drives through a blinding blizzard with her friend Tess Olmos and their dogs, golden retriever Belle and German shepherd Mozart. Maggie has offered her professional decluttering skills to help Tess tidy up her late husband’s cabin in preparation to sell. She also plans to get in some skiing when her husband Max and their boys join them later in the week.

What she doesn’t plan on is finding a boot in a snowdrift attached to a corpse. The frozen stiff turns out to be Tess’s neighbor, Dev Bailey, who disappeared two months ago. His widow, Leslie, expresses grief, but Maggie can’t help but wonder if it’s all a snow job. As more suspects start to pile up, things go downhill fast, and Maggie must keep her cool to solve the murder before the killer takes a powder...

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

Mary Feliz (M.F.): *“Anxious People” by Fredrik Backman is funny and sweet but etches the finest of lines between cynicism and hope. It’s a teddy bear hug of a book with a brilliantly spiraling plot. It was my absolute favorite of 2020, and I’ve been*

recommending it to friends, family, and strangers who seem suddenly thrilled to be social distancing.

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

M.F.: *Memorable fan experience? When folks tell me my books carried them through a miserable time in their lives, as though I was holding their hand, I'm thrilled. I hope everyone feels that connection with my characters. I know that when I've read a Louise Penny book, I feel I've visited Three Pines and I miss the characters between books. I hope I give readers a little bit of that same sense of community and family with my stories. It's what makes Belle wag her tail.*

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

M.F.: *Hearing "Snowed Under" was selected as a "Best of" book busted my buttons. I read widely across all the mystery subgenres and always find new books for my TBR pile on Suspense Magazine's "Best of" list. It helps readers to spot books in subgenres that might not be their usual cup of tea. For example, fans of dystopian or political novels who like whip-smart women and quirky characters might need a book, especially this year, that ends on a more hopeful note. I hope they'll give my book and some of the other cozies a whirl. ■*



Press Photo Credit:
Provided by Author

"KILLER KUNG PAO" by Vivien Chien (St. Martin's Paperbacks; August 25, 2020): Is life at the Ho-Lee Noodle House becoming too hot to handle?

Lana Lee's plate is already plenty full. Running her family's Chinese restaurant in Cleveland's Asia Village is challenging on the best of days. But just when Lana thinks she might be able to catch her breath before the weekend—which she's eager to spend with her equally overworked boyfriend, Detective Adam Trudeau—Lana witnesses a car accident in the parking lot. And now she has no choice but to get involved.

June Yi, of Yi's Tea and Bakery, is a serious businesswoman well-known for her heartlessness. But June meets her match when she rear-ends the Cadillac belonging to mahjong lover Mildred "Millie" Mao. As each woman curses—and threatens—the other, it becomes clear to Lana that trouble lies ahead. Still, who could have imagined that Millie would end up dead at the beauty salon? The evidence suggests that she was electrocuted while having a foot bath, and all eyes

are on June. Can Lana find a way to solve this case before another fatality occurs in Asia Village?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

Vivien Chien (V.C.): *The most memorable would be an email that I received from a cancer patient who thanked me for writing the Noodle Shop series. He read my books while healing from surgery, and would bring them along to doctors' appointments and treatments. It was such a great honor for me because the one hope I have as an author is to provide entertainment and some escape from the real world to my reader. I'll never forget that email.*

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

V.C.: *Picking a favorite fictional villain is tough... I feel like there are so many people who do such a great job in that role. BUT, if I had to choose just one, it would be Regina Mills/The Evil Queen in Once Upon a Time. You love to hate her, and kinda feel sorry for her at the same time. Plus—her outfits are amazing.*

Without a shadow of a doubt, my favorite heroine would be Buffy the Vampire Slayer. If I were in a bind, I'd definitely want her to come to my rescue. (Sorry, Superman.)

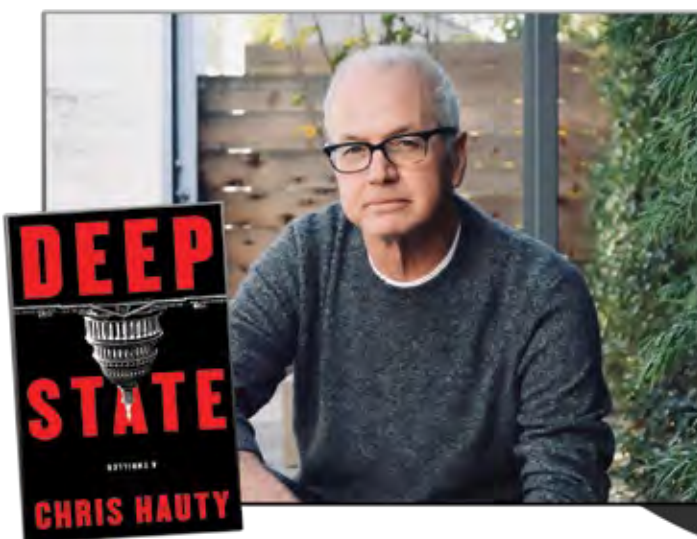
S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a "Best of" by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

V.C.: *I feel very fortunate to have been chosen as one of the best books in this category. There were so many great cozy mysteries that came out this year, and I am in great company. Thank you to the contributors, staff, and fans who found "Killer Kung Pao" to be worthy of this nomination, it makes my heart sing! ■*

DEBUT BEST of 2020

“DEEP STATE” by Chris Hauty (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; January 7, 2020): In this white-knuckled, timely, whip-smart, debut thriller, a deadly plot against the president’s life emerges from the shadows of the Deep State.

Recently elected President Richard Monroe—populist, controversial, and divisive—is at the center of an increasingly polarized Washington, DC. Never has the partisan drama been so tense, or the paranoia run so rampant. In the midst of contentious political turf wars, the White House Chief of Staff is found dead in his house. A tenacious intern discovers a single, ominous clue that suggests he died from something other than natural causes, and that a wide-ranging conspiracy is running beneath the surface of everyday events: powerful government figures are scheming to undermine the rule of law and democracy, itself. Allies are exposed as enemies, once-dependable authorities fall under suspicion, and no one seems to be who they say they are. The unthinkable is happening. The Deep State is real. Who will die to keep its secrets and who will kill to uncover the truth?



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

Chris Hauty (C.H.): *White House intern confronts Deep State-sponsored presidential assassination attempt.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

C.H.: “*Savage Road*,” the follow-up to “*Deep State*,” arrives on 01/05/21. I’m busy with book three in the series and prepping the sale of a television adaptation to networks.

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

C.H.: *Validation that I’m doing something right. As an artist/writer, you’re never quite sure until you put the work out there and start counting the votes. Thanks for letting me know I’m doing something right!*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

C.H.: “*Get Shorty*” by the great Elmore Leonard. ■



Press Photo Credit: Robin Winkles Photography

choice but to try. He's going in on high alert, but he's blind to his greatest vulnerability. His most dangerous enemy is closer to home—not on the battlefield, but in the Oval Office.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Don Bentley (D.B.): *2021 is shaping up to be a pretty incredible year. The paperback edition of "Without Sanction" is coming out in February and the sequel, "The Outside Man," will be released in March. In addition to my Matt Drake series, I've also been given the opportunity to take over the Tom Clancy Jack Ryan, Jr. franchise from the extremely talented and very kind Mike Maden. My first book in this series, "Target Acquired," will be released in June.*

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

D.B.: *I'm a huge fan of the thriller genre and have regularly attended the annual ThrillerFest conference for the last 7 or 8 years. "Without Sanction" sold just days before the 2018 ThrillerFest, and I was able to celebrate by sharing a few drinks with authors Nick Petrie, Graham Brown, Boyd Morrison, and Patrick Lee. These bestselling writers generously spent several hours sharing some of the highs and lows of their writing careers, and I can't thank them enough. As both a fan of their collective work, and a debut author, it was an evening I'll never forget.*

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

D.B.: *I'm incredibly honored that Suspense Magazine chose "Without Sanction" as one of the Best of 2020 in the Debut Category selection. I've been a fan of the thriller genre my entire life, and it's mind-blowing to think that my book was chosen alongside all the other stellar awardees. I'm incredibly grateful to the Suspense Magazine staff and all the thriller fans who took a chance on an unknown, debut author. ■*

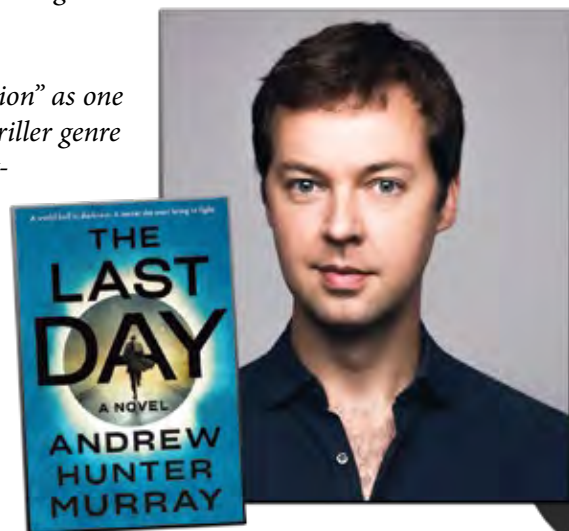
"THE LAST DAY" by Andrew Hunter Murray (Dutton; February 4, 2020): *A world half in darkness. A secret she must bring to light.*

It is 2059, and the world has crashed. Forty years ago, a solar catastrophe began to slow the planet's rotation to a complete stop. Now, one half of the globe is permanently sunlit; the other half trapped in an endless night. The United States has colonized the southern half of Great Britain—lucky enough to find itself in the narrow habitable region left

"WITHOUT SANCTION" by Don Bentley (Berkley; March 3, 2020): Defense Intelligence Agency operative Matt Drake broke a promise. A promise that cost three people their lives and crippled his best friend. Three months later, he's paralyzed by survivor's guilt and haunted by the memories of the fallen. Matt may have left Syria, but Syria hasn't left him.

In the midst of his self-imposed exile, Matt is dragged back into the world of espionage and assets that he tried to forget. A Pakistani scientist working for an ISIS splinter cell has created a terrifying weapon of mass destruction. The scientist offers to defect with the weapon, but he trusts just one man to bring him out of Syria alive—Matt Drake.

It's a suicide mission—one man against an army of terrorists. Still, with stakes this high, Matt has no

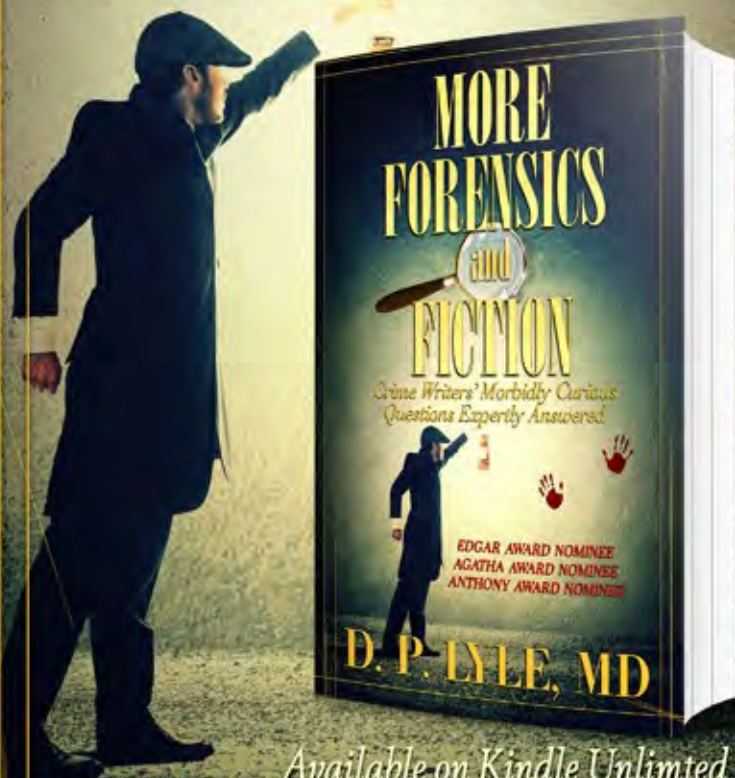


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between frozen darkness and scorching sunlight—where both nations have managed to survive the ensuing chaos by isolating themselves from the rest of the world.

Ellen Hopper is a scientist living on a frostbitten rig in the cold Atlantic. She wants nothing more to do with her country after its slide into casual violence and brutal authoritarianism. Yet when two government officials arrive, demanding she return to London to see her dying college mentor, she accepts—and begins to unravel a secret that threatens not only the nation's fragile balance, but the future of the entire human race.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

Andrew Hunter Murray (A.H.M.): J.G. Farrell's *"The Siege of Krishnapur."* A few stuffy English colonialists find themselves unexpectedly fighting in a civil war. It's an amazing portrayal of an empire on the wane; gripping and terrifying, yet... somehow often funny too.

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

A.H.M.: Don't compare your Microsoft Word document with someone else's finished book. At some point they only had a Word document, too. Also, no, you don't need that adverb.

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

A.H.M.: ...enviously Googling people I knew who had become authors and plotting their grisly deaths. ■

"A BURNING" by Megha Majumdar (Knopf; June 2, 2020): In this National Book Award Longlist honoree and "gripping thriller with compassionate social commentary" (*USA Today*), Jivan is a Muslim girl from the slums, determined to move up in life, who is accused of executing a terrorist attack on a train because of a careless comment on Facebook. PT Sir is an opportunistic gym teacher who hitches his aspirations to a right-wing political party, and finds that his own ascent becomes linked to Jivan's fall. Lovely—an irresistible outcast whose exuberant voice and dreams of glory fill the novel with warmth and hope and humor—has the alibi that can set Jivan free, but it will cost her everything she holds dear. ■



DARKURBAN *Fantasy* BEST of 2020



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“SUCKER PUNCH” by Laurell K. Hamilton (Berkley; August 4, 2020): *A brutal murder, a suspect in jail, and an execution planned. But what if the wrong person is about to be killed?*

When a fellow U.S. Marshal asks Anita Blake to fly to a tiny community in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula on an emergency consult, she knows time is running short. When she arrives, there is plenty of proof that a young wereleopard killed his uncle in the most gruesome and bloody way possible.

As the mounting evidence points to him, a warrant of execution is already under way.

But something seems off about the murder, and Anita has been asked for her expert opinion on the crime scene. Despite escalating pressure from local cops and the family’s cries for justice for their dead patriarch, Anita quickly realizes that the evidence doesn’t quite add up.

Time is against Anita, as the tight-knit community is up in arms and its fear of supernaturals is growing. She races to uncover the truth and determine whether the Marshals have caught the killer or are about to execute an innocent man—all in the name of justice.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Laurell K. Hamilton (L.K.H.): *In February, “Rafael,” the newest Anita Blake novel comes out. Rafael, king of the wererats, is fighting for his crown and his life with Anita by his side. Summer of 2021 is the planned release of the first book in my brand-new series, “A Terrible Fall of Angels,” featuring Detective Havelock. The City of Angels is about to live up to its name.*

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

L.K.H.: Having “Sucker Punch” chosen as one of your best for 2020 means that Anita and I are still kicking ass and taking names.

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

L.K.H.: If I wasn’t a writer, I would be a wildlife biologist. ■

“CROOKED RIVER” by Preston & Child (Grand Central Publishing; February 4, 2020): *A startling crime with dozens of victims.*

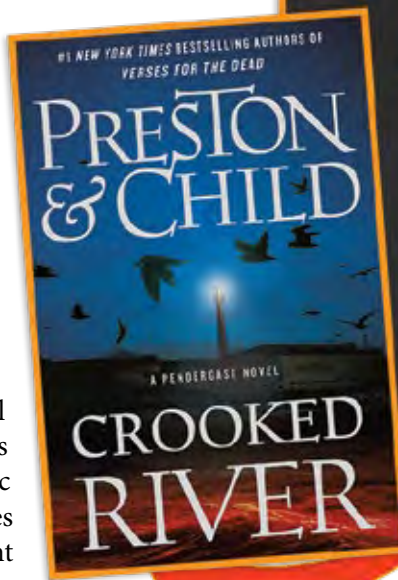
Appearing out of nowhere to horrify the quiet resort town of Sanibel Island, Florida, dozens of identical, ordinary-looking shoes float in on the tide and are washed up on the tropical beach; each one holds a crudely severed human foot inside.

A ghastly enigma with no apparent solution.

Called away from vacation elsewhere in the state, Agent Pendergast reluctantly agrees to visit the crime scene—and, despite himself, is quickly drawn in by the incomprehensible puzzle. An early pathology report only adds to the mystery. With an ocean of possibilities confronting the investigation, no one is sure what happened, why, or from where the feet originated. And they desperately need to know: Are the victims still alive?

A worthy challenge for a brilliant mind.

In short order, Pendergast finds himself facing the most complex and inexplicable challenge of his career: A tangled thread of evidence that spans seas and traverses continents, connected to one of the most baffling mysteries in modern medical science. Through shocking twists and turns, all trails lead back to a powerful adversary with a sadistic agenda, and who—in a cruel irony—ultimately sees in Pendergast the ideal subject for their malevolent research.



Press Photo Credit: Deborah Feingold

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child (D.P. & L.C.): “*Tristram Shandy*” by Laurence Sterne.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

D.P. & L.C.: *We’re publishing a thriller in our new Nora Kelly/Corrie Swanson series on January 12th, entitled “The Scorpion’s Tail.” It takes place in New Mexico and involves the Victorio Peak Treasure, the White Sands Missile Range, and the Trinity Test.*

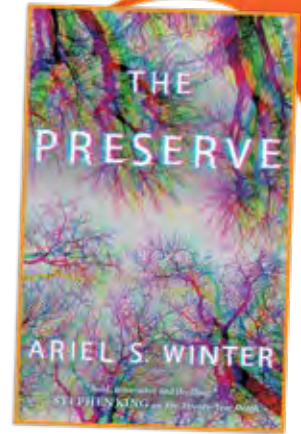
S. MAG.: If you could write a message to future aspiring authors and place it in a time capsule to read years later, what would you write?

D.P. & L.C.: *I would tell them: “The medium may shift, but the elements of a great story are eternal.” ■*

“THE PRESERVE” by Ariel S. Winter (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; November 3, 2020): Decimated by plague, the human population is now a minority. Robots—complex AIs almost indistinguishable from humans—are the ruling majority. Nine months ago, in a controversial move, the robot government opened a series of preserves, designated areas where humans can choose to live without robot interference. Now the preserves face their first challenge...someone has

been murdered.

Chief of Police Jesse Laughton on the SoCar Preserve is assigned to the case. He fears the factions that were opposed to the preserves will use the crime as evidence that the new system does not work. As he digs for information, robots in the outside world start turning up dead from bad, drug-like programs that may have originated on SoCar land. And when Laughton learns his murder victim was a hacker who wrote drug programs, it appears that the two cases might be linked. Soon, it's clear that the entire preserve system is in danger of collapsing. Laughton's former partner, a robot named Kir, arrives to assist on the case, and they soon uncover shocking secrets revealing that life on the preserve is not as peaceful as its human residents claim. But in order to protect humanity's new way of life, Laughton must solve this murder before it's too late. ■



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

“THE ONCE AND FUTURE WITCHES”

by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook; October 13, 2020): In 1893, there's no such thing as witches. There used to be—in the wild, dark days before the burnings began—but now witching is nothing more than tidy charms and nursery rhymes. If the modern woman wants any measure of power, she must find it at the ballot box.

But when the Eastwood sisters—James Juniper, Agnes Amaranth, and Beatrice Belladonna—join the suffragists of New Salem, they begin to pursue the forgotten words and ways that might turn the women's movement into the witch's movement. Stalked by shadows and sickness, hunted by forces who will not suffer a witch to vote—and perhaps not even to live—the sisters will need to delve into the oldest magics, draw new alliances, and heal the bond between them if they want to

survive.

There's no such thing as witches. But there *will* be.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

Alix E. Harrow (A.E.H.): *It's a three-way tie between Tamsyn Muir's "Harrow the Ninth," Silvia Moreno-Garcia's "Mexican Gothic," and Emily Danforth's "Plain Bad Heroines," and probably nine or ten other titles I can't remember right now!*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

A.E.H.: *I've got a novella coming out next year with Tor Dot Com! It was pitched as 'Spider-Verse plus Sleeping Beauty', so there are lots of Sleeping Beauties falling through the multiverse and trying to escape their stories. It was an absurd amount of fun.*

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

A.E.H.: *If I wasn't an author, I would be a parent, an above-average pie baker, a below-average sister, and a great ping-pong player. The only real difference is that I'd be back below the poverty line. ■*

Romantic SUSPENSE BEST of 2020

“POINT OF DANGER” by Irene Hannon (Revell; October 6, 2020): Radio talk show host Eve Reilly is used to backlash from her pot-stirring on-air commentary and interviews, but now it seems a disgruntled listener is resorting to more than angry words to express their displeasure. When a suspicious package arrives on her doorstep, Eve turns to law enforcement for help.

Police Detective Brent Lange can't find any evidence to link the string of unsettling incidents that follows, but he's convinced they're connected. As the harassment grows more menacing, it becomes clear someone wants Eve's voice silenced—permanently.

But unless he can track down her foe, and fast, the gutsy woman who is willing to take risks for what she believes—and who is swiftly winning his heart—may not survive.

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

Irene Hannon (I.H.): *Radio host's controversial views put her in a killer's sights.*



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S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

I.H.: *“Point of Danger” was Book 1 in my Triple Threat series, which features three sisters involved in professions that put them in the line of fire. (Each can be read as a standalone.) In the next book, “Labyrinth of Lies,” Detective Cate Reilly and former colleague Zeke Sloan—the man who once stole her heart—are reunited when she goes undercover at an exclusive girls school and discovers no one is who they seem to be...and danger awaits around every turn. This releases in October. For contemporary romance fans, my next Hope Harbor novel, “Blackberry Beach,” will be out in April.*

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

I.H.: *Indeed I do! I'm a stickler for detail and do huge amounts of research for every book—which pays off, as I discovered with my first suspense novel, “Against All Odds.” That book featured a dual-continent setting, a terrorist plot, and the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team. A few months after it came out, I got an email from a reader who said he'd enjoyed the book, but that he chewed tobacco, not the end of a cigar (as my fictional HRT leader did). Turns out this guy was a former HRT commander who shared my character's first name. I immediately wrote back and assured him the character wasn't based on him—but he replied that I'd nailed his personality, nonetheless. Then he went on to commend my research, saying I'd gotten everything correct, right down to the actual radio call signals the HRT uses on missions. Praise from such a credible source was so gratifying. And it proved that all my research is worth the effort because it adds an extra layer of authenticity to my stories. ■*

“AFTER SUNDOWN” by Linda Howard and Linda Jones (William Morrow; March 31, 2020): Sela Gordon, the shy



owner of a Tennessee general store, finds safety in solitude. But if anyone can pierce her protective shell it's the handsome, mysterious, ex-military man living alone in the wilds of Cove Mountain. For two years, he's kept his distance—until the day he appears to warn her that a catastrophic solar storm capable of taking down the power grid is coming. Now, Sela must find the courage to become the leader Wears Valley needs.

Bitter experience has taught Ben Jernigan it's best to look out for number one. For two years the former soldier has lived in a self-imposed exile, using a top-notch security system to keep people away. But he had to let Sela know about the impending threat, and now the quiet and undeniably sexy woman is making it too easy for him to lower his guard.

As panic spreads, Sela and Ben discover that in the dark, cut off from the outside world, there's no more playing it safe—in life or in love. ■

“THICK AS THIEVES” by Sandra Brown (Grand Central Publishing; August 25, 2020): *Twenty years ago, in the dead of night, four seemingly random individuals pulled the ultimate heist and almost walked away with half a million dollars. But by daybreak, their plan had been shot to hell. One of them was in the hospital. One was in jail. One was dead. And one...got away with it.*

Arden Maxwell, the daughter of the man who disappeared all those years ago—presumably with the money, after murdering his accomplice—has never reconciled with her father's abandonment of her and her sister. After countless personal setbacks, she decides to return to her family home near mysterious Caddo Lake and finally get answers to the many questions that torment her. Little does she know, two of her father's co-conspirators—a war hero and a corrupt district attorney—are watching her every move.

Ledge Burnet, a rebellious teen at the time of the heist, evaded his jail sentence by enlisting in the Army. Now he's back in town to care for his ailing father—and to keep his eye on the county's corrupt district attorney, whom he suspects was the real murderer. Although the two are bound to silence because of the crime they committed together, each has spent years waiting and hoping that the other will make a fatal misstep. But the arrival of their elusive accomplice's daughter, Arden, who may know more about the missing money than she's telling, sets them both on red alert. She ignites Ledge's determination to expose the D.A.'s treachery...and sparks a desire he wishes to deny.



Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Sandra Brown (S.B.): *Something different: A period piece.*

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

S.B.: *Recognition of hard work is like getting a standing ovation—a year later.*

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

S.B.: *A floral designer.* ■

SuspenseMagazine.com

Press Photo Credit: Andrew Eccles

“BURN YOU TWICE” by Mary Burton (Montlake; September 29, 2020): Ten years ago, as an undergrad, Joan Mason escaped an arsonist’s fire. Shaken, she fled the small collegiate Montana town, leaving behind friends and not looking back. Now a Philadelphia homicide detective, Joan’s trying to put her traumas to rest. It’s not easy. Elijah Weston, the classmate who torched her house, is out of prison and returning to Missoula. Gut instinct tells Joan he’ll strike again. To stop him, she must return to the past as well in order to face not only the man she fears, but Detective Gideon Bailey, too. The man she loved and left behind.

When a local woman dies tragically in another fire, it can’t be a coincidence. Can it be Elijah? He has a solid alibi for the night of the blaze.



Press Photo Credit:
Provided by Author

Reunited by the tragedy, Joan and Gideon have their doubts. So does Gideon’s sister, Ann—Joan’s old college roommate.

The investigation draws Joan and Gideon together, but it also sends them down a dangerous path...into a troubling history that Joan, Elijah, and Ann all share. As more lives go up in flames in Missoula, this town’s secrets rise from the ashes.

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

Mary Burton (M.B.): *When an arsonist is released from prison and women in a small Montana town begin dying in fires, a homicide detective is forced to confront this ex-con who nearly burned her alive a decade ago.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

M.B.: *In 2021, I’ll release two suspense novels: “Near You” (the follow-up to “Burn You Twice”) in April, and “Don’t Look Back” in the fall. Also, under the name Mary Ellen Taylor, I’ll be releasing “The Words We Whisper” in July.*

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

M.B.: *There will be times when you doubt yourself, when you’re struggling to find the words or to make a sale. Remember, it’s happened to all writers. The trick is to keep writing and believe if you persist, you will realize your dream. ■*

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HISTORICAL BEST OF 2020

“THE BLUES DON’T CARE” by Paul D. Marks (Down & Out Books; May 31, 2020): Bobby Saxon lives in a world that isn’t quite ready for him. He’s the only white musician in an otherwise all-black swing band at the famous Club Alabam in Los Angeles during World War II...and that isn’t the only unique thing about him.

And if that isn’t enough to deal with, in order to get a permanent gig with the band, Bobby must first solve a murder that one of the band members is falsely accused of in that racially prejudiced society.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Who’s your favorite fictional villain? Favorite hero/heroine?

Paul D. Marks (P.D.M.): *I’m not sure about a villain, but my favorite “hero” is the Count of Monte Cristo. Though he might be part hero*



Press Photo Credit: Linda Campanelli

and part villain in one, which makes him more complex than your average hero. I love revenge stories and seeing people get vengeance (read “justice”) when they’ve been wronged. And nobody exacts revenge like the Count in so many clever and cunning ways.

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

P.D.M.: *To have the staff, contributors, and fans of such a well-respected magazine recognize “The Blues Don’t Care” means a hell of a lot to me! We all strive for recognition in our work and when it is recognized, you feel like you’ve accomplished something—that you’ve reached readers and made that connection you strive for. But, of all my books, this has a special meaning for me with “The Blues Don’t Care.” This deals with some very tough issues in the context of a crime novel. Much of it is set in L.A. neighborhoods I know well, though before my time in the 1940s during World War II. And I was lucky to have my mom and her friends, who lived here during that era, help me with first person research and reminiscences, which was really cool. For a variety of reasons I won’t go into here, I wanted ‘Blues’ to be totally expansive and very immersive into the society and zeitgeist of the time period. And I think I was able to go back and recreate the noir L.A. of that war era. An L.A. that I saw glimpses of but never got the chance to really explore. I’ve had this love/hate relationship with the city and I got a chance to show both the good and the bad of the city that I grew up in with “The Blues Don’t Care.”*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

P.D.M.: “*Tapping the Source*” by Kem Nunn (who’s also written for *Deadwood* and *Sons of Anarchy*). This book blows me away. If it didn’t invent surf-noir, it’s the ultimate surf-noir story and definitely not the Beach Boys’ or the Chamber of Commerce’s version of sun, sand, surf and surfer girls, but a much darker vision of life on SoCal’s beaches. It’s set in Huntington Beach, down the coast from L.A. I guess it has a cult following; hell, it was a finalist for the National Book Award. But most people I talk to haven’t heard of it, though it seems more have lately. It also combines a human story within a crime novel, which is also something I try to do in my own work. ■



Press Photo Credit: Erin Manuel

“MURDER AT KINGSCOTE” by Alyssa Maxwell (Kensington; August 25, 2020): *In late nineteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island, journalist Emma Cross discovers the newest form of transportation has become the newest type of murder weapon...*

On a clear July day in 1899, the salty ocean breeze along Bellevue Avenue carries new smells of gasoline and exhaust as Emma, now Editor-in-Chief of the *Newport Messenger*, covers Newport’s first-ever automobile parade. But the festive atmosphere soon turns to shock as young Philip King drunkenly swerves his motorcar into a wooden figure of a nanny pushing a pram on the obstacle course.

That evening, at a dinner party hosted by Ella King at her magnificent Gothic-inspired “cottage” known as Kingscote, Emma and her beau Derrick Andrews are enjoying the food and the company when Ella’s son staggers in, obviously still inebriated. But the disruption is nothing compared to the urgent shouts of the coachman. Rushing out, they find the family’s butler pinned against a tree beneath the front wheels of Philip’s motorcar, close to death.

At first, the tragic tableau appears to be a reckless accident—one which could ruin Philip’s reputation. When Emma later receives a message informing her that the butler bullied his staff and took advantage of young maids, she begins to suspect the scene may have been staged and steers the police toward a murder investigation. But while Emma investigates the connections between a competing heir for the King fortune, a mysterious child, an inmate of an insane asylum, and the brutal boxing rings of Providence, a killer remains at large—with unfinished business to attend to...

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

Alyssa Maxwell (A.M.): *If I wasn’t an author, I would be...an astronaut or a ballerina. Seriously, growing up I wanted to be an astronaut, a ballerina, or a writer. Seeing as I have absolutely no aptitude for the first two due to a very real problem with motion sickness and the flexibility of a Popsicle stick, I think I chose the right career path, even though plenty of people indicated I’d have as much chance of being a successful author as I had of being either of the first two choices. I guess I showed them! And one of the benefits of being a writer is you can live out your dreams and aspirations through your characters, who can be as rock steady and/or flexible as you want them to be.*

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

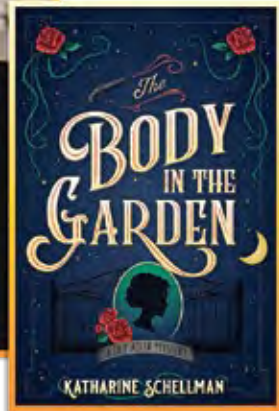
A.M.: *If I could be a superhero, I’d be Batgirl, of course! Why? Because in her ordinary civilian life, Barbara Gordon is a librarian with a Ph.D. in Library Science, and she’s super smart! My superpower would be the ability to read with lightning speed (allowing me to burn through my “to-be-read” pile) and retain everything, and I would preside over the largest, most well-organized, and beautiful library in the world. And anyone with overdue books, or who returns books damaged, had better look out! Because I would also have those mad fighting skills.*

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

A.M.: *My Hollywood pitch in ten words or less: Murder, She Wrote meets The Age of Innocence!* ■



Press Photo Credit: Leah O'Connell



“THE BODY IN THE GARDEN” by Katharine Schellman (Crooked Lane Books; April 7, 2020): *London 1815*. Though newly-widowed Lily Adler is returning to a society that frowns on independent women, she is determined to create a meaningful life for herself even without a husband. She’s no stranger to the glittering world of London’s upper crust. At a ball thrown by her oldest friend, Lady Walter, she expects the scandal, gossip, and secrets. What she doesn’t expect is the dead body in Lady Walter’s garden.

Lily overheard the man just minutes before he was shot— young, desperate, and attempting blackmail. She’s willing to leave the matter to the local constables, until Lord Walter bribes the investigating magistrate to drop the case. Stunned and confused, Lily realizes she’s the only one with the key to catching the killer.

Aided by a roguish Navy captain and a mysterious heiress from the West Indies, Lily sets out to discover whether her friend’s husband is mixed up in blackmail and murder. The unlikely trio tries to conceal their investigation behind the whirl of London’s social season, but the dead man knew secrets about people with power. Secrets that they would kill to keep hidden. Now, Lily will have to uncover the truth before she becomes the murderer’s next target.

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

Katharine Schellman (K.S.): *A BBC costume drama with murder instead of marriage.*

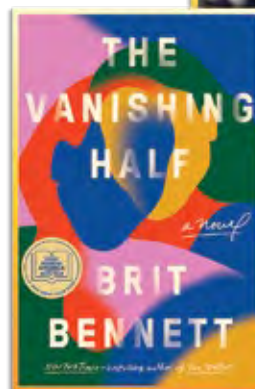
S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

K.S.: *The second Lily Adler mystery, “Silence in the Library,” will be hitting bookshelves on July 13, 2021! I can’t wait to share it with everyone.*

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

K.S.: *An actor! I was a professional stage performer for five and a half years before I stopped to focus on writing, and part of me would love to do that again. But a completely different part of me has always regretted not becoming a middle school math teacher.* ■

“THE VANISHING HALF” by Brit Bennett (Riverhead Books; June 2, 2020): The Vignes twin sisters will always be identical. But after growing up together in a small, southern, black community and running away at age sixteen, it’s not just the shape of their daily lives that is different as adults, it’s everything: their families, their communities, their racial identities. Many years later, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same southern town she once tried to escape. The other secretly passes for white, and her white husband knows nothing of her past. Still, even separated by so many miles and just as many lies, the fates of the twins remain intertwined. What will happen to the next generation when their own daughters’ storylines intersect? ■



Press Photo Credit: Miranda Barnes

Young ADULT

BEST of 2020

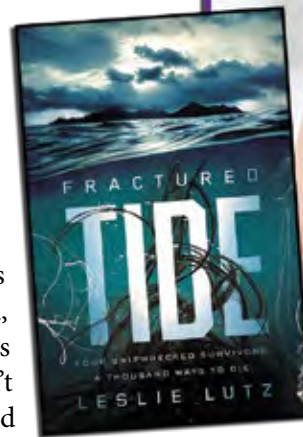
“FRACTURED TIDE” by Leslie Lutz (Blink; May 5, 2020): Sia practically grew up in the water while scuba diving, and wreck dives are run of the mill. Take the tourists out. Explore the reef. Uncover the secrets locked in the sunken craft. But this time...the dive goes terribly wrong.

Attacked by a mysterious creature, Sia's boat is sunk, her customers are killed, and she washes up on a deserted island with no sign of rescue in sight. Waiting in the water is a seemingly unstoppable monster that is still hungry. In the jungle, just off the beach, there are dangers best left untested. When Sia reunites with a handful of survivors, she sees it as the first sign of light.

Sia is wrong.

Between the gulf of deadly seawater in front of her, and the suffocating depth of the jungle behind her, even the island isn't what it seems.

Haunted by her own mistakes and an inescapable dread, Sia's best hope for finding answers may rest in the center of the island, at the bottom of a flooded sinkhole that only she has the skills to navigate. But even if the creature lurking in the depths doesn't swallow her and the other survivors, the secrets of their fractured reality on the island might.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Do you have a memorable fan experience you can share?

Leslie Lutz (L.L.): Covid completely derailed my book tour, so when a school up in Michigan asked me to do a Zoom event, I jumped at the chance. It was really great to talk to real students who had read my book. Then two of them showed me their projects—actual honest-to-God projects—linked to the world in “Fractured Tide.” One student created the entire island out of Legos; another used Minecraft to do something similar with the sinkhole on the island, where a lot of the action in the book takes place. I thought to myself, ‘How did I become project worthy?’ It was the highlight of my year, honestly.

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

L.L.: I would run an espresso stand on a gorgeous beach somewhere. I'd start work at six a.m., sell my coffee and muffins until 2:00 in the afternoon, then close up shop and spend the rest of the day in the water. I really don't think I'd get tired of that life, and I'd have all the coffee I could drink.

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

L.L.: I'm working on a book about a haunted safe, which the main character should absolutely NOT open. But he's gonna. ■

“THE HAND ON THE WALL” by Maureen Johnson (Katherine Tegen Books; January 21, 2020): *Ellingham Academy must be cursed. Three people are now dead. One, a victim of either a prank gone wrong or a murder. Another, dead by misadventure. And now, an accident in Burlington has claimed another life. All three were in the wrong place at the wrong time. All at the exact moment of Stevie’s greatest triumph...*

She knows who Truly Devious is. She’s solved it. The greatest case of the century.

At least, she thinks she has. With this latest tragedy, it’s hard to concentrate on the past. Not only has someone died in town, but David disappeared of his own free will and is up to something. Stevie is sure that *somehow* all these things connect. The three deaths in the present. The deaths in the past. The missing Alice Ellingham and the missing David Eastman. Somewhere in this place of riddles and puzzles there *must* be answers.

Then another accident occurs as a massive storm heads toward Vermont. This is too much for the parents and administrators. Ellingham Academy is evacuated. Obviously, it’s time for Stevie to do something stupid. It’s time to stay on the mountain and face the storm... and a murderer.



Press Photo Credit: Angela Altus

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Maureen Johnson (M.J.): *A lot of things, including a new Stevie Bell murder mystery called “The Box in the Woods,” in which Stevie investigates a series of murders that took place at a summer camp in 1978. Don’t go into the woods. Don’t open strange boxes.*

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



M.J.: *Maybe Bertie Wooster is my favorite hero because he lives in the joyful state of not knowing what is going on.*

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

M.J.: *I’m thrilled because I tried to create suspense!* ■

“I KILLED ZOE SPANOS” by Kit Frick (Margaret K. McElderry Books; June 30, 2020): *What happened to Zoe won’t stay buried...*

When Anna Cicconi arrives to the small Hamptons village of Herron Mills for a summer nanny gig, she has high hopes for a fresh start. What she finds instead is a community on edge after the disappearance of Zoe Spanos, a local girl who has been missing since New Year’s Eve. Anna bears an eerie resemblance to Zoe, and her mere presence in town stirs up still-raw feelings about the unsolved case. As Anna delves deeper into the mystery, stepping further and further into Zoe’s life, she becomes increasingly convinced she and Zoe are connected, and that she *knows* what happened to her.

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

VIEBURY GROVE



A
Method
15/33
Thriller

"Along the way I was certain Kirk penned the story in her own blood using a strand of barbed wire for a quill. It's that good."

—James R. Benn, Author of the *Billy Boyle World War II Mysteries*

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Two months later, Zoe's body is found in a nearby lake, and Anna is charged with manslaughter. But Anna's confession is riddled with holes, and Martina Green, teen host of the *Missing Zoe* podcast, isn't satisfied. Did Anna really kill Zoe? And if not, can Martina's podcast uncover the truth?

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

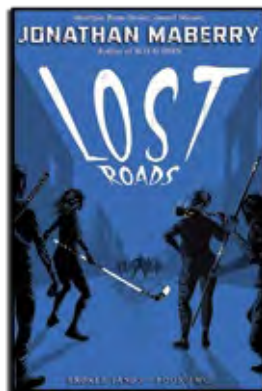
Kit Frick (K.F.): "I Killed Zoe Spanos" is YA "Rebecca" in the Hamptons with a true crime podcast!

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

K.F.: Recognition in the suspense category is incredibly meaningful! Having now published three books in the genre, you'd think it would get easier to craft a compelling YA thriller. However, the truth is that each book poses its own set of challenges, and it's incredibly gratifying to hear from readers and staff at *Suspense Magazine* that "I Killed Zoe Spanos" hit the mark!

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

K.F.: A private chef! I love cooking for others and I'm pretty good at it, too. Being self-employed as a writer has taught me a lot about running my own small business. In an alternate universe, I can imagine applying that to private dining! ■



"LOST ROADS" by Jonathan Maberry (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers; November 3, 2020): Gabriella "Gusty" Gomez lost her mother, and now she's losing her home.

Gutsy and her friends, along with Benny and his crew, have just survived a massive attack on New Alamo by the Night Army—a mix of mindless shambling los muertos and sentient half-zombie ravagers.

She's also reeling from the revelation that the residents of her town were the lab rats of the biological testing facility linked to creating the most dangerous zombie, the Raggedy Man, who controls all of the living dead.

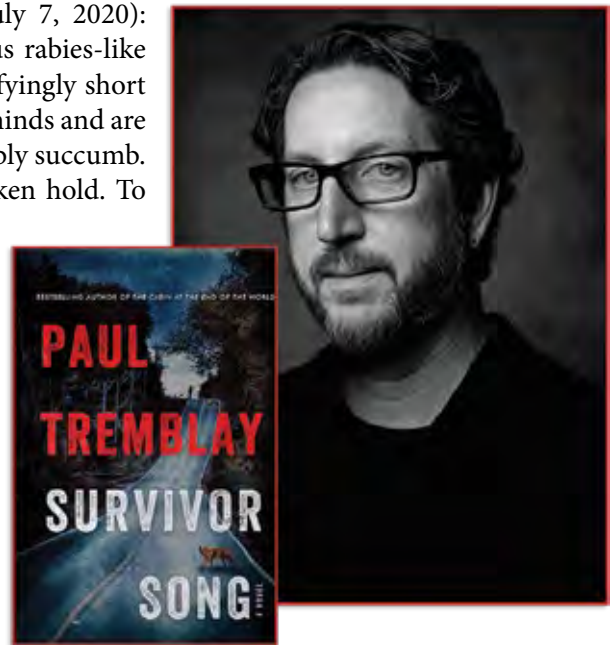
And the first raid was only a test. The *real* Night Army is coming, and this time, it'll be a handful of survivors against seven billion zombies. ■

BEST OF HORROR 2020

“SURVIVOR SONG” by Paul Tremblay (William Morrow; July 7, 2020): In a matter of weeks, Massachusetts has been overrun by an insidious rabies-like virus that is spread by saliva. But unlike rabies, the disease has a terrifyingly short incubation period of an hour or less. Those infected quickly lose their minds and are driven to bite and infect as many others as they can before they inevitably succumb. Hospitals are inundated with the sick and dying, and hysteria has taken hold. To try to limit its spread, the commonwealth is under quarantine and curfew. But society is breaking down and the government’s emergency protocols are faltering.

Dr. Ramola “Rams” Sherman, a soft-spoken pediatrician in her mid-thirties, receives a frantic phone call from Natalie, a friend who is eight months pregnant. Natalie’s husband has been killed—viciously attacked by an infected neighbor—and in a failed attempt to save him, Natalie, too, was bitten. Natalie’s only chance of survival is to get to a hospital as quickly as possible to receive a rabies vaccine. The clock is ticking for her and for her unborn child.

Natalie’s fight for life becomes a desperate odyssey as she and Rams make their way through a hostile landscape filled with dangers beyond their worst nightmares—terrifying, strange, and sometimes deadly challenges that push them to the brink.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Paul Tremblay (P.T.): *William Morrow and Titan Books (UK) are rereleasing my first two detective novels, “The Little Sleep” and “No Sleep Till Wonderland,” which were originally published in 2009 and 2010. Both books feature the private detective Mark Genevich, who lives in South Boston and suffers from narcolepsy. While there’s a mystery/crime to solve in each book, Mark, or the mystery of the self, is the true mystery. I hope.*

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

P.T.: *Unplug your brain from the neural web interface? Read books excavated from an archaeological book depository?*

Okay, I’ll be serious. Give yourself permission to be patient with your writing and your career. It’s okay to have a story or book rejected and when (not if) that happens, write the next one. And the one after that.

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

P.T.: *All of them!*

Actually, I don’t think about my favorite novels that way. Usually, I think, ‘Wow, I could never do that,’ and then I might try

to do something to hopefully achieve a similar affect. I tend to be a magpie as a writer and I build my nests by using all manner of stray bits and straws. So, while I never think 'I wish I wrote that book,' my reaction is more, 'I'd like to try that someday.'

There are a handful of films of which I wish I'd written novel versions. The movie *Take Shelter* comes to mind, starring Michael Shannon and Jessica Chastain. Shannon's character is a blue-collar worker in the Midwest, son of a schizophrenic mother, who is unsure if he's seeing signs and portents of the end of the world. Despite rationally knowing he's likely not, he can't help but act as though he is. A powerful, heartbreaking, unsettling movie and, well...I wish I wrote that book. ■



Press Photo Credit:
Douglas Sonders



“ELSEWHERE” by Dean Koontz (Thomas & Mercer; October 6, 2020): Since his wife, Michelle, left seven years ago, Jeffy Coltrane has worked to maintain a normal life for himself and his eleven-year-old daughter, Amity, in Suavidad Beach. It's a quiet life, until a local eccentric known as Spooky Ed shows up on their doorstep.

Ed entrusts Jeffy with hiding a strange and dangerous object—something he calls “the key to everything”—and tells Jeffy that he must never use the device. But after a visit from a group of ominous men, Jeffy and Amity find themselves accidentally activating the key and discovering an extraordinary truth. The device allows them to jump between parallel planes that are at once familiar and bizarre, wondrous and terrifying. And Jeffy and Amity can't help but wonder, could Michelle be just a click away?

Jeffy and Amity aren't the only ones interested in the device. A man with a dark purpose is in pursuit, determined to use its grand potential for profound evil. Unless Amity and Jeffy can outwit him, the place they call home may never be safe again.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Who's your favorite fictional villain?

Dean Koontz (D.K.): *In my own work, it's probably The Outsider in “Watchers.” It genuinely scared me and also inspired pity. If I could pull that off in every book, I'd be a genius. Unfortunately, I'm only me. I also had great fun with Konrad Beezo and his son, Punchinello, in “Life Expectancy”; no two characters that psychotic have so often both chilled me and made me laugh.*

S. MAG.: Favorite hero/heroine?

D.K.: *I have so many heroines I love in my own work that I can't narrow it down to one. So I'll go with Clarice Starling in Thomas Harris's “The Silence of the Lambs,” especially as she was so brilliantly portrayed by Jodie Foster in the film.*

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

D.K.: *“I wish I was there.”* ■

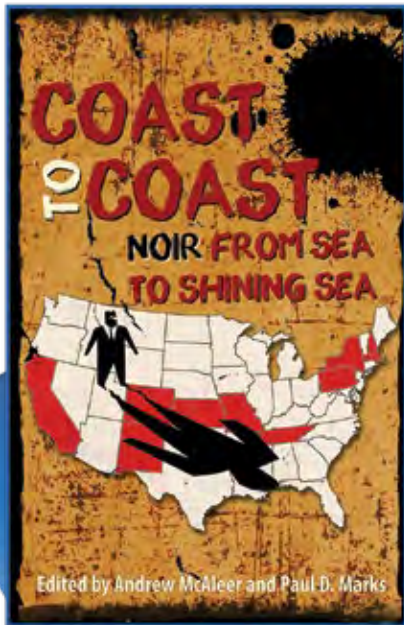


“THE CHILL” by Scott Carson (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; February 11, 2020): In this terrifying thriller, a supernatural force—set in motion a century ago—threatens to devastate New York City.

Far upstate, in New York's ancient forests, a drowned village lays beneath the dark, still waters of the Chlewauckee Reservoir. Early in the 20th century, the town was destroyed for the greater good—bringing water to the millions living downstate. Or, at least, that's what the politicians from Manhattan insisted at the time. The local families, settled there since America's founding, were forced off their land but they didn't move far. Some didn't move at all...

Now, a century later, the repercussions of human arrogance are finally making themselves known. An inspector assigned to oversee the dam, dangerously neglected for decades, witnesses something inexplicable. It turns out that more than the village was left behind in the waters of “The Chill” when it was abandoned. The townspeople didn't evacuate without a fight. A dark prophecy remained too, and the time has come for it to be fulfilled. Those who remember must ask themselves: Who will be next? For sacrifices must be made. And as the dark waters begin to inexorably rise, the demand for a fresh sacrifice emerges from the deep. ■

BEST of 2020 ANTHOLOGY



“COAST TO COAST NOIR” edited by Andrew McAleer and Paul D. Marks (Down & Out Books; September 27, 2020): It doesn’t have to be set in ‘the dark of a rainy night’ for it to be noir. It doesn’t have to be ‘shadowy rooms of Venetian blinds’. It doesn’t even have to be a femme fatale. Noir is somebody tripping over their own faults, somebody who has an Achilles heel, some kind of greed or want or desire that leads them down a dark path, from which there is sometimes no return.

No one is safe. There’s no place to hide in this collection of twelve stories from the dark side of the American Dream.

Stories of noir from Coast to Coast.

Contributors: Colleen Collins—Denver, Colorado; Brendan DuBois—rural Massachusetts; Alison Gaylin—Hudson Valley, New York; Tom MacDonald—Nashua, New Hampshire; Andrew McAleer—Boston, Massachusetts; Michael Mallory—Springfield, Missouri; Paul D. Marks—Venice Beach/Los Angeles, California; Dennis Palumbo—Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Stephen D. Rogers—Providence, Rhode Island; John Shepphird—Los Alamos, New Mexico; Jaden Terrell—Nashville, Tennessee; and, Dave Zeltserman—small town Kansas.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Paul D. Marks (P.D.M.): *We really enjoy doing the Coast to Coast series of crime anthologies. They usually come out every other year, so there might not be one in 2021, but hopefully in 2022. See you for another dark ride then.*

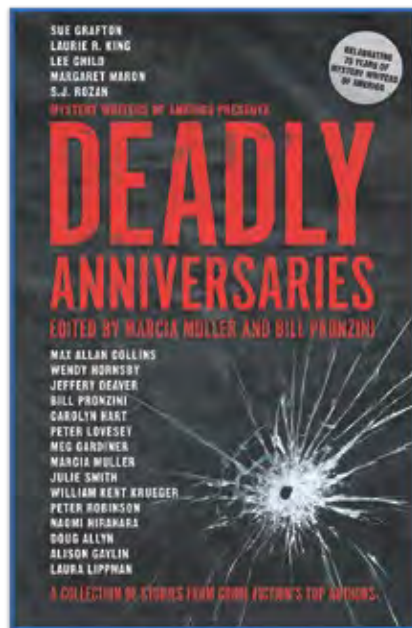
S. MAG.: What does having your book chosen as a “Best of” by *Suspense Magazine* mean to you?

P.D.M.: *As one of the editors of “Coast to Coast: Noir,” I think I can speak for Andy, my co-editor, and the authors, in saying that we are all truly thrilled by this great honor. It’s always interesting to come up with a theme for an anthology and then see how each author tackles that theme. For this anthology we had a basic definition of “noir” that worked for us, as otherwise it can be defined very broadly. And within that definition it’s really killer to see how the various authors tackled both the theme and the locations from coast to coast. It’s especially gratifying when our combined efforts result in recognition from such a fine magazine.*

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

P.D.M.: *The publishing business is changing so rapidly it’s hard to know what advice won’t go stale in several years. Certainly, the technology will change. But I doubt some other things will. A lot of people tell me they have an idea for the greatest novel since individual sheets of paper were invented (Jack Kerouac’s scroll notwithstanding). But that’s about as far as they get. The hardest thing is to just sit yourself in a chair and write—write anything. You can “fix it in the editing room.” And that’s the other piece of advice that I don’t think will ever change. It’s really all in the rewriting. And rewrite as much as you need to in order to hone your story into shape. So, in a couple of words: discipline and rewriting. That would be my advice. ■*

“BEST AMERICAN MYSTERY STORIES 2020” (The Best American Series) by Otto Penzler (editor) and C. J. Box (Best American Paper; November 3, 2020): C. J. Box, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of the hugely popular *Joe Pickett* series, selects the best short mystery and crime fiction of the year in this annual “treat for crime-fiction fans” (*Library Journal*). ■



“DEADLY ANNIVERSARIES: A COLLECTION OF STORIES FROM CRIME FICTION’S TOP AUTHORS”

edited by Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini (Hanover Square Press; April 21, 2020): An anniversary can honor many things: a birth, a wedding, and sometimes even a death. In “Deadly Anniversaries,” editors Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini present new stories from some of the best contemporary authors to honor the diamond jubilee of the Mystery Writers of America, an organization founded on the principle that “Crime Doesn’t Pay—Enough.”

Each author puts their own unique spin on what it means to recognize a certain day or event each year. These nineteen stories travel across a wide range of historical and contemporary settings and remind readers of how broad the mystery writing tradition can be, encompassing detective tales, domestic intrigue, psychological suspense, black humor, and thrilling action.

By the time this group of bestsellers and award-winners is through, none of us will ever look at anniversaries the same way again. “Deadly Anniversaries” is sure to shock, scare, and delight mystery and suspense fans of all kinds, featuring the following contributors: Sue Grafton, Laurie R. King, Lee Child, Margaret Maron, S.J. Rozan, Max Allan Collins, Wendy Hornsby, Jeffery Deaver, Bill Pronzini, Carolyn Hart, Peter Lovesey, Meg Gardiner, Marcia Muller, Julie Smith, William Kent Krueger, Peter Robinson, Naomi Hirahara, Doug Allyn, Alison Gaylin, Laura Lippman.

Peter Robinson, Naomi Hirahara, Doug Allyn, Alison Gaylin, Laura Lippman.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Marcia Muller (M.M.): *The 34th Sharon McCone novel, “Ice and Stone,” will be published by Grand Central in August. In it, Sharon travels to a fictional county at the extreme north of California—and, as usual, wicked things happen.*

Bill Pronzini (B.P.): *“The Paradise Affair,” #9 in the Carpenter & Quincannon historical detective series, set primarily in the Hawaiian Islands and scheduled for late January 2021; publication by Tor/Forge.*

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

M.M.: If I wasn’t an author, I’d be unemployed—and unemployable.

B.P.: If I wasn’t an author, I would be an antiquarian bookseller specializing in mysteries.

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

M.M.: *My message for the time capsule would read: Be true to yourself; write what you care about, not what’s currently selling. Your writing is a job, no matter how little time you have to devote to it. So, when time is available, apply butt to chair, turn on whatever device you use, and WRITE!*

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

B.P.: *Favorite fictional villain: Casper Gutman (“The Maltese Falcon”). Favorite hero: toss-up among Sir Henry Merrivale (Carter Dickson), Nero Wolfe & Archie Goodwin (Rex Stout), and Philip Marlowe (Raymond Chandler). ■*

TRUE CRIME BEST OF 2020

“THE BEST NEW TRUE CRIME STORIES: SMALL TOWNS” by Mitzi Szereto (Mango; July 14, 2020): *Small Town Charm with Deadly Consequences: A collection of non-fiction accounts by international writers and experts on small town true crime, shows readers that the real monsters aren't hiding in the woods, they're inside our towns.*

Small towns aren't always what they seem. We've been told nothing bad happens in small towns. You can leave your doors unlocked and your windows wide open. We picture peaceful hamlets with a strong sense of community, where everyone knows each other. But what if this wholesome idyllic image doesn't always square with reality? Small towns might look and feel safe, but statistics show this isn't really the case.

Tiny town; big crime. Whether in Truman Capote's detailed murder of the Clutter family, or Ted Bundy's small-town charm, criminals have always roamed rural America and towns worldwide. Featuring murder stories, criminal case studies, and more, “The Best New True Crime Stories: Small Towns” contains all-new accounts from writers of true crime, crime journalism, and crime fiction. And these entries are not *based* on a true story—they *are* true stories. Edited by acclaimed author and anthologist Mitzi Szereto, the stories in this volume span the globe. Discover how unsolved murders, kidnappings, shooting sprees, violent robberies, and other bad things can and *do* happen in small towns all over the world.



Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Mitzi Szereto (M.S.): *I'll be continuing with my true crime franchise, with book number three scheduled for release in summer 2021—"The Best New True Crime Stories: Well-Mannered Crooks, Rogues & Criminals." It contains a wide variety of stories from around the world, so there's definitely something for everyone. I'm pleased to be welcoming back many writers from the previous books (both the Small Towns and Serial Killers volumes), as well as several who are new to the series, including Dean Jobb and Paul Willetts. The book is already available for pre-order, so please do order a copy. Better yet, order a copy for yourself, your friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers. Do your bit to promote literacy!*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

M.S.: *The one that immediately comes to mind is Patricia Highsmith's "The Talented Mr. Ripley." I love psychological crime/thrillers and this ranks at the top of the list. The psychology of the characters appeals to me as a writer, especially Tom Ripley. Although he's an amoral psychopath, you can still identify with him and, at times, even root for him—which says a lot about Highsmith's creative genius, especially when it comes to crafting her characters. The film version starring Matt Damon and Jude Law is also a major favorite of mine.*

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



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“AMERICAN SHERLOCK: MURDER, FORENSICS, AND THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN CSI”

by Kate Winkler Dawson (G.P. Putnam’s Sons; February 11, 2020): *Berkeley, California, 1933*. In a lab filled with curiosities—beakers, microscopes, Bunsen burners, and hundreds upon hundreds of books—sat an investigator who would go on to crack at least two thousand cases in his forty-year career. Known as the “American Sherlock Holmes,” Edward Oscar Heinrich was one of America’s greatest—and first—forensic scientists, with an uncanny knack for finding clues, establishing evidence, and deducing answers with a skill that seemed almost supernatural.

Heinrich was one of the nation’s first expert witnesses, working in a time when the turmoil of Prohibition led to sensationalized crime reporting and only a small, systematic study of evidence. However, with his brilliance and commanding presence in both the courtroom and at

crime scenes, Heinrich spearheaded the invention of a myriad of new forensic tools that police still use today, including blood spatter analysis, ballistics, lie-detector tests, and the use of fingerprints as courtroom evidence. His work, though not without its serious—some would say fatal—flaws, changed the course of American criminal investigation.

Based on years of research and thousands of never-before-published primary source materials, “American Sherlock” captures the life of the man who pioneered the science our legal system now relies upon, as well as the limits of those techniques and the very human experts who wield them.

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

Kate Winkler Dawson (K.W.D.): *America’s Sherlock Holmes solves complicated crimes and makes history.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

K.W.D.: *Listen to my historical true crime podcast “Tenfold More Wicked” on Exactly Right (the home of “My Favorite Murder”).*

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

K.W.D.: *Don’t wait too long to begin writing. Do your research, but know when to stop reading and start creating.* ■



“HUNTING THE UNABOMBER: THE FBI, TED KACZYNSKI, AND THE CAPTURE OF AMERICA’S MOST NOTORIOUS DOMESTIC TERRORIST”

by Lis Wiehl & Lisa Pulitzer (Thomas Nelson; April 28, 2020): On April 3, 1996, a team of FBI agents closed in on an isolated cabin in remote Montana, marking the end of the longest and most expensive investigation in FBI history. The cabin’s lone inhabitant was a former mathematics prodigy and professor who had abandoned society decades earlier. Few people knew his name, Theodore Kaczynski, but everyone knew the mayhem and death associated with his nickname: “The Unabomber.”

For two decades, Kaczynski had masterminded a campaign of random terror, killing and maiming innocent people through bombs sent in untraceable packages. The FBI task force charged with finding the perpetrator of these horrifying crimes grew to 150 people, yet his identity remained a maddening mystery. Then, in 1995, a “manifesto” from The Unabomber was published in the *New York*

Times and *Washington Post*, resulting in a cascade of tips—including the one that finally cracked the case. ■

**"GUARANTEED TO KEEP READERS BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL
WELL INTO THE WEE HOURS."**

-Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

NOTHING GOOD HAPPENS AFTER MIDNIGHT

A SUSPENSE MAGAZINE ANTHOLOGY

JEFFERY DEAVER

WITH ADDITIONAL
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BEST of 2020

“COVER YOUR TRACKS” by Daco S. Auffenorde (Keylight Books; October 20, 2020): Margo Fletcher, eight months pregnant, is traveling by train from Chicago to Spokane, her childhood home. While passing through an isolated portion of the Rockies in blizzard conditions, the train unexpectedly brakes. Up ahead, deadly snow from a massive avalanche plummets down the mountain. Despite the conductor’s order for the passengers to stay seated, former Army Ranger Nick Eliot insists that survival depends on moving to the back of the train. Only Margo believes him. They take refuge in the last train car, which Nick heroically uncouples in time to avoid the avalanche. The rest of the train is hurled down the mountainside and is soon lost forever in a blanket of snow. Margo and Nick, the sole survivors, are stranded in the snowstorm without food, water, or heat. Rescuers might not arrive for days.

When the weather turns violent again, the pair must flee the shelter of the passenger car and run for their lives into the wilderness. They must fend off the deadly cold as well as predatory wild animals foraging for food. Eventually, Nick leads Margo to shelter in a watchtower atop a mountain. There, we learn that both Margo and Nick have secrets that have brought them together and threaten to destroy them.



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

Daco S. Auffenorde (D.S.A.): *Two train-wreck survivors—one pregnant—combat avalanches, predators, and themselves.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

D.S.A.: *I’ve just finished my next psychological thriller, “Down She Falls,” which is about a woman who survives a fall from the fourth story of a hotel building in New York City, only to wake with severe psychogenic amnesia. Although she suffered no serious physical injuries, can speak, and can comprehend the present, she has no memories of her past, how she fell, or who she really is. Except, she remembers that her first name is Blue. The cold truth is that someone wants her dead, and there’s no place to hide, no answers, and only days to put the pieces together. It’s a story of betrayal, courage, and redemption.*

S. MAG.: What is the best book you read in 2020?

D.S.A.: *“The Nickel Boys” by Colson Whitehead, which deservedly won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The book, ostensibly literary fiction, has many thriller-suspense elements. Two African American teenage boys find themselves incarcerated in a horrendous Florida reform school during the Jim Crow era. The shocking, gripping story recounts how the two young boys, in their different ways, fight to survive an evil racist system from which there appears to be no means of escape. The deeply moving story is horrifying, and yet reaffirms the power of the human spirit. And like the best thrillers, it’s a book that I couldn’t put down.* ■



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Ryan Jehangir



“HOUSE ON FIRE” by Joseph Finder (Dutton; January 21, 2020): Nick Heller is at the top of his game when he receives some devastating news: his old Army buddy Sean has died of an overdose. Sean, who once saved Nick’s life, got addicted to opioids after returning home wounded from war.

At Sean’s funeral, a stranger approaches Nick with a job, as well as a way for Nick to perhaps hold someone accountable. The woman is the daughter of a pharmaceutical kingpin worth billions. Now she wants to become a whistleblower—exposing her father and his company for burying evidence that its biggest money maker was dangerously addictive. It was a lie that killed hundreds of thousands of people, including Sean.

All Nick has to do is find the document that proves the family knew the drug’s dangers. But Nick soon realizes that the sins of the patriarch are just the beginning.

Beneath the surface are barely concealed cabals and conspiracies: a twisting story of family intrigue and lethal corporate machinations. In a deadly game of chess that pits Nick against a family dynasty, against brothers and sisters with schemes of their own, Nick learns how far his enemy is willing to go to protect its name and its wealth.

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

Joseph Finder (J.F.): *Nick Heller investigates the one family more toxic than his own.*

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

J.F.: “Favorite villain” is a great question because there are so many to choose from. The first one that came to mind was Annie Wilkes from Stephen King’s “Misery,” but she’s pretty author-specific. If I’m choosing a villain who’s a threat to everyone, it’s hard to beat IT, the malevolent intelligence at the center of “A Wrinkle in Time” by Madeleine L’Engle. IT is the purest distillation of evil, an entity that exists for no other reason but to destroy everyone else’s happiness.

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

J.F.: *It’s deeply satisfying to see one’s own work listed among books and authors I admire. I’m grateful to think that “House of Fire” has those books as peers.*

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

J.F.: *If you want to save something, print it out. Print lasts. ■*

“INVISIBLE GIRL” by Lisa Jewell (Atria Books; October 13, 2020):

Young Saffyre Maddox spent three years under the care of renowned child psychologist Roan Fours. When Dr. Fours decides their sessions should end, Saffyre feels abandoned. She begins looking for ways to connect with him, from waiting outside his office to walking through his neighborhood late at night. She soon learns more than she ever wanted to know about Roan and his deceptively perfect family life. On a chilly Valentine’s eve, Saffyre will disappear, taking any secrets she has learned with her.

Owen Pick’s life is falling apart. Now in his thirties and living in his aunt’s spare bedroom, he has just been suspended from his job as a teacher after accusations of sexual



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misconduct—accusations he strongly denies. Searching for professional advice online, he is inadvertently sucked into the dark world of incel forums, where he meets a charismatic and mysterious figure.

Owen lives across the street from the Fours family. The Fours have a bad feeling about their neighbor; Owen is a bit creepy and suspect and their teenage daughter swears he followed her home from the train station one night. Could Owen be responsible? What happened to the beautiful missing Saffyre, and does her disappearance truly connect them all?

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

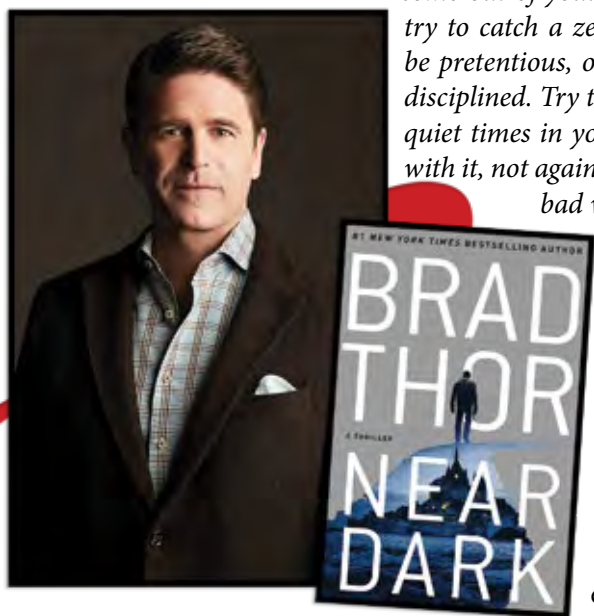
Lisa Jewell (L.J.): *Without a doubt, the best book I read in 2020 was “The Push” by Ashley Audrain. It was an advance reader’s copy and actually won’t be published until the beginning of January 2021, but that’s just around the corner so I think it still counts as a 2020 book! It’s a beautifully written, slow-burn psychological drama with undertones of “We Need to Talk About Kevin,” but a hundred times more readable. A young couple welcomes a beautiful new baby girl into their lives, but very soon Blythe starts to wonder if something is wrong with her daughter because she doesn’t behave like most children do. Her husband says she’s imagining things but the more he dismisses her fears, the more Blythe begins to question her own sanity, and the more we begin to question what Blythe is telling us about her life as well. I read this book in one sitting, gripped from the first word until the last.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

L.J.: *In 2021, I will be publishing two books, which is rather exciting. First off, on January 26th, my seventh novel, “The Truth About Melody Browne” (originally published in the UK in 2008), will finally be published in the US/Canada for the first time. “The Truth About Melody Browne” marked my move away from the rom-coms and relationship novels I’d been known for writing up until then and laid the foundation for the thrillers and mysteries that were yet to come. It’s about a girl who loses her memory after a house fire when she is eight but then slowly starts to remember things as a thirty-year-old single mother. As she rebuilds her memories, she realizes that everything she thought she knew about her childhood was a lie. Then, in September, my 19th novel, “The Night She Disappeared,” will be published in the US/Canada. It’s about a teenage couple who go out on a date night to their local pub shortly after the birth of their baby, get invited to a pool party at the mansion of a rich kid from their village, and never come home. Two years later, clues start appearing in the village pointing to the possibility that someone, somewhere knows what happened to them.*

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

L.J.: *One thing I have learned, and I have been lucky to have had two incredible editors in my career who have instilled this in me, is to trust your instincts. Don’t overthink and don’t second guess. Write what comes out of you, not what you think should come out of you. Don’t write for a perceived market or to follow a publishing trend. Don’t try to catch a zeitgeist moment because it will be gone before you’ve got hold of it. Don’t be pretentious, or use language you wouldn’t use in real life; no one will be impressed. Be disciplined. Try to make a routine of some sort—the best writing happens during really dull, quiet times in your life. Be boring. Be open. Embrace what comes onto the page and work with it, not against it. Only hate yourself if you don’t write, not if you write badly. You can fix bad writing. You can’t fix no writing.*



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

L.J.: *An editor. ■*

“NEAR DARK” by Brad Thor (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; July 21, 2020): The world’s largest bounty has just been placed on America’s top spy. His only hope for survival is to outwit, outrun, and outlast his enemies long enough to get to the truth.

But for Scot Harvath to accomplish his most dangerous mission ever—one that has already claimed the lives of the people closest to him, including his new wife—he’s going to need help...and a lot of it.

Not knowing who he can trust, Harvath finds an unlikely ally in Norwegian intelligence operative Sølvi Kolstad. Just as smart, just as deadly, and just as determined, she not only has the skills but also the broken, troubled past to match Harvath's own.

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

Brad Thor (B.T.): *The largest bounty in history placed on America's top spy.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

B.T.: *An electrifying new thriller, packed with wall-to-wall action, that takes readers into the heart of the next global conflict.*

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

B.T.: *It is an honor. Each year, I strive to get better—to top what I wrote the year before. When Suspense Magazine recognizes my work as a "Best of," I know I have succeeded at my goal. ■*

"SAVAGE SON" by Jack Carr (Atria/Emily Bestler Books; April 14, 2020): Deep in the wilds of Siberia, a woman is on the run, pursued by a man harboring secrets—a man intent on killing her.

A traitorous CIA officer has found refuge with the Russian mafia with designs on ensuring a certain former Navy SEAL sniper is put in the ground.

Half a world away, James Reece is recovering from brain surgery in the Montana wilderness, slowly putting his life back together with the help of investigative journalist Katie Buranek and his longtime friend and SEAL teammate, Raife Hastings. Unbeknownst to them, the Russian mafia has set their sights on Reece in a deadly game of cat and mouse.

In his most visceral and heart-pounding thriller yet, Jack Carr explores the darkest instincts of humanity through the eyes of a man who has seen both the best and the worst of it.



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Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Jack Carr (J.C.): *A novel titled "The Devil's Hand" that explores what our enemy has learned by watching the United States on the battlefield in two decades of constant warfare, and what they have incorporated into their battle plans for an imminent attack on the homeland.*

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

J.C.: *Write what you like to read! Don't worry about anything but writing the best novel you possibly can. Don't waste bandwidth worrying about agents, self-publishing vs. a more traditional publishing house, how you will market, what your website will look like, or anything other than making your work the very best it can possibly be!*

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

J.C.: *A Navy SEAL. But since I did that already, I'll stick with being an author. ☺ ■*



Press Photo Credit: Shannon Black, www.shannonblack.net

“SINS OF THE MOTHER” by August Norman (Crooked Lane Books; September 8, 2020): *Caitlin went in search of her mother...but what she found may set the world on fire.*

Caitlin Bergman’s mother is dead. That’s what the award-winning journalist has told everyone for the past forty years. Easier to lie than explain how Maya abandoned her only daughter before dropping off the map forever.

But when a rural sheriff invites Caitlin to the woods of coastal Oregon to identify her mother’s remains, Caitlin drops everything to face the woman she’s spent a lifetime hating. Unfortunately, the body—abandoned on the land of a reclusive cult called the Daughters of God—was left faceless. Instead, Caitlin finds the diary of a woman obsessed with the end of the world; one that also hints the cult’s spiritual leader knows the identity of Caitlin’s real father. She’s not the only one looking for clues buried in her mother’s writing. Johnny Larsen, a violent white supremacist whose family runs the county, thinks the Daughters of God kidnapped his teenage daughter—and will do anything to get her back.

At the top of a hill, an army of women wait for the end of days. In the town below, the Larsen’s plot to purify their county. Caught in the middle, Caitlin must decide which is more important—learning the truth about her past, or saving Mama Maya’s chosen daughters from the end of the world.

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

August Norman (A.N.): *A cult, white supremacists, and Caitlin’s search for her mother.*

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

A.N.: *While a good review or critical acclaim never hurts a writer’s ego, Suspense’s “Best of” lists are chosen by readers, which means my work managed to make a connection with actual fans. Considering that the industry published more options than ever in 2020, and the pandemic prevented face-to-face interaction and promotion, I’m honored and blown away to know that suspense fiction fans still found the time and space in their hearts to connect with Caitlin, despite the state of the world.*



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

A.N.: *Time is precious. Rather than wasting valuable seconds telling yourself why no one will like your writing, study the craft, hone your voice, and write the stories you want to read. Whether or not the world embraces your work, you’ll have created something unique and one hundred percent your own.* ■

“THE NEW HUSBAND” by D. J. Palmer (St. Martin’s Press; April 14, 2020): *What makes Simon Fitch so perfect?*

- He knows all her favorite foods, music, and movies.
- Her son adores him. He was there when she needed him most.
- He anticipates her every need.
- He would never betray her like her first husband.

The perfect husband. He checks all the boxes.

The question is, *why?*

Nina Garrity learned the hard way that her missing husband, Glen, had been leading a double life with another woman. But with Glen gone—presumably drowned while fishing on his boat—she couldn’t confront him about the affair or find closure to the life

he blew apart.

Now, a year and a half later, Nina has found love again and hopes she can put her shattered world back together. Simon, a widower still grieving the death of his first wife, thinks he has found his dream girl in Nina, and his charm and affections help break through to a heart hardened by betrayal. Nina's teenage son, Connor, embraces Simon as the father he wishes his dad could have been, while her friends see a different side to him, and they aren't afraid to use the word 'obsession' to describe the man.

Nina works hard to bridge the divide that forms between her daughter and Simon. She wants so badly to believe her life is finally getting back on track, but she'll soon discover that the greatest danger to herself and her children are the lies people tell themselves.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What is the best book you read in 2020?

D. J. Palmer (D.J.P.): *So many great reads from a tough year, it's hard to pick one, but I'd say it's a toss-up between "The Sun Down Motel" by Simone St. James, a creepy slow burn of a thriller with a great atmosphere; and, "If it Bleeds" by Stephen King. Hey, there's a reason King is cited by many as one of their biggest influences.*

S. MAG.: What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

D.J.P.: *In 2021, St. Martin's Press will publish my twelfth novel, "The Perfect Daughter," which tells the story of a girl with dissociative identity disorder accused of murdering her birth mother. It's a wild ride with what's probably the most shocking ending of any of my books. I'm looking forward to readers diving into this story.*

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

D.J.P.: *If I could write a message to future authors to inspire them, I'd put two phrases into that time capsule: 1) Be Fearless. 2) This is hard. That was the advice I got from my father, acclaimed author Michael Palmer, who passed away suddenly in 2013. I'd also suggest the future author keeps trying and working on their craft because the formula for success in this business is: time+talent+perseverance+luck=career. And it's not always the most talented writer who launches a career, but persistence—that dogged determination is, without doubt, a prerequisite for any long-term success. ■*



Press Photo Credit: S. A. Cosby



"BLACKTOP WASTELAND" by S.A. Cosby (Flatiron Books; July 14, 2020): A husband, a father, a son, a business owner...and the best getaway driver east of the Mississippi.

Beauregard "Bug" Montage is an honest mechanic, a loving husband, and a hard-working dad. Bug knows there's no future in the man he used to be—known from the hills of North Carolina to the beaches of Florida as the best wheelman on the East Coast.

He thought he'd left all that behind him, but as his carefully built new life begins to crumble, he finds himself drawn inexorably back into a world of blood and bullets. When a smooth-talking former associate comes calling with a can't-miss jewelry store heist, Bug feels he has no choice but to get back in the driver's seat. And Bug is at his best when the scent of gasoline mixes with the smell of fear.

Haunted by the ghost of who he used to be and the father who disappeared when he needed him most, Bug must find a way to navigate this blacktop wasteland...or die trying.

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

S.A. Cosby (S.A.C.): *It's Hell Or Highwater meets Drive with an African American lead.*

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

S.A.C.: *Favorite villain, Hannibal Lecter. Favorite hero, Easy Rawlins.*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you'd written?

S.A.C.: *"She Rides Shotgun" by Jordan Harper. It's a masterpiece of violence and love. ■*

"ONE BY ONE" by Ruth Ware (Gallery/Scout Press; September 8, 2020): Getting snowed-in at a luxurious, rustic ski chalet set high in the French Alps doesn't sound like the worst problem in the world. Especially when there's a breathtaking vista, a full-service chef and housekeeper, a cozy fire to keep you warm, and others to keep you company. Unless that company happens to be eight co-workers...each with something to gain, something to lose, and something to hide.

When the cofounder of Snoop, a trendy London-based tech startup, organizes a week-long trip for the team in the French Alps, it starts out as a corporate retreat like any other: PowerPoint presentations and strategy sessions broken up by mandatory bonding on the slopes. But as soon as one shareholder upends the agenda by pushing a lucrative but contentious buyout offer, tensions simmer and loyalties are tested. The storm brewing inside the chalet is no match for the one released by Mother Nature, however, and a devastating avalanche leaves the group cut off from all access to the outside world. Even worse, one "Snooper" hadn't made it back from the slopes when the avalanche hit.

As each hour passes without any sign of rescue, panic mounts, the chalet grows colder, and the group dwindles further...one by one.



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

Ruth Ware (R.W.): *Tech group trapped by avalanche. Then people start getting murdered!*

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

R.W.: *Too many to list—but being brought an authentic Chicago pizza while on tour in Chicago was a highlight! Amazingly, it was still warm.*

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

R.W.: *An accountant. For real. I love a good spreadsheet. But I would also still be writing. ■*



"THE NIGHT SWIM" by Megan Goldin (St. Martin's Press; August 4, 2020): Ever since her true-crime podcast became an overnight sensation and set an innocent man free, Rachel Krall has become a household name—and the last hope for people seeking justice. But she's used to being recognized for her voice, not her face. Which makes it all the more unsettling when she finds a note on her car windshield, addressed to her, begging for help.

The new season of Rachel's podcast has brought her to a small town being torn apart by a devastating rape trial. A local 'golden boy', a swimmer destined for Olympic greatness, has been accused of raping the beloved granddaughter of the police chief. Under pressure to make Season 3 a success, Rachel throws herself into her investigation—but the mysterious letters keep coming. Someone is following her, and she won't stop until Rachel finds out what happened to her sister twenty-five years ago. Officially, Jenny Stills tragically drowned, but the letters insist she was murdered—and when Rachel starts asking questions, nobody in town wants to answer. The past and present start to collide as Rachel uncovers startling connections between the two cases, and a revelation that will change the course of the trial and the lives of everyone involved. ■

And the Winner is. . .



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“HOME BEFORE DARK” by

Riley Sager (Dutton; June 30, 2020): Twenty-five years ago, Maggie Holt and her parents, Ewan and Jess, moved into Baneberry Hall, a rambling Victorian estate in the Vermont woods. Three weeks later they fled in the dead of night, an ordeal Ewan later recounted in a nonfiction book called “House of Horrors.” His horror memoir of ghostly happenings and encounters with malevolent spirits became a worldwide phenomenon, rivaling *The Amityville Horror* in popularity and skepticism.

Today, Maggie is a restorer of old homes, and too young to remember any of the events mentioned in her father’s book. But she also doesn’t believe a word of it. Ghosts, after all, don’t exist. When Maggie inherits Baneberry Hall after her father’s death, she returns to renovate the place to prepare it for sale. But her homecoming is anything but warm. People from the past, chronicled in “House of Horrors,” lurk in the shadows. And locals aren’t thrilled that their small town has been made infamous thanks to Maggie’s father. Even more unnerving is Baneberry Hall, itself—a place filled with relics from another era that hint at a history of dark

deeds. As Maggie experiences strange occurrences straight out of her father’s book, she starts to believe that what he wrote was more fact than fiction.

Alternating between Maggie’s uneasy homecoming and chapters from her father’s book, “Home Before Dark” is the story of a house with long-buried secrets and a woman’s quest to uncover them—even if the truth is far more terrifying than any haunting.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): What can fans expect to see from you in 2021?

Riley Sager (R.S.): *There’ll be a new book coming out at the end of June. It’s called “Survive the Night,” and it’s unlike anything else I’ve ever written in that it takes place mostly in real time. It’s short and fast and very suspenseful. I can’t wait until readers get to experience it.*

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

R.S.: *I did a signing at Book Expo America right before “Lock Every Door” was released. When I got to the signing booth, there was a huge line of people there, all eager to get their ARCs signed. It was crazy. The signing was supposed to last thirty minutes but was extended to an hour, and even then, people had to be turned away. I was so grateful for that moment. It felt like my work was not only being read by a bunch of people but that it resonated with them, too. So being able to chat with all of them one on one, even if just for a minute or two, was an amazing experience.*

S. MAG.: Is there a book, written by another, that you wish you’d written?

R.S.: *“Beautiful Ruins” by Jess Walter, which is one of my favorite books. It’s about so many things—love, the movies, the scars left by World War II, Italy, Richard Burton—and involves so many characters that it could have been a complete mess. Instead, it’s gorgeous and funny and true, and everything ties together perfectly in the final, transcendent chapter. ■*



How Do You Catch a Fugitive with **NOTHING TO LOSE?**



US Marshals Madison James and Jonas Quinn have orders to transport two high-profile prisoners across the country. But when their plane experiences engine trouble en route, they're forced to crash-land deep in the heart of the sprawling Salmon-Challis National Forest.

When the smoke clears, both pilots and one prisoner are dead—and one fugitive is on the run. Now, Madison and Jonas must negotiate the rugged and remote backcountry as they track a murderer who is desperate to disappear . . . and will do anything to stop them.

Connect with Lisa on Facebook @[AuthorLisaHarris](#)
or visit her website!

[LisaHarrisWrites.com](#)

Writing Thriller Protagonists With Psychiatric Conditions

By Joel Shulkin, MD
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Our experiences, both enriching and traumatic, shape our overall mental health and well-being over the course of our lifespan. Underlying biologic mechanisms determine how vulnerable we are to those experiences, and whether they strengthen us or tear us down. But, in turn, our mental health affects the way we react to new experiences. An individual who feels secure and stable is likely to act much differently than one who feels persecuted or violated; or one who can't trust even their own personal thoughts and feelings.

As a pediatrician specializing in children with developmental disorders, like autism and ADHD, I'm particularly attuned to mental health and the way these individuals are viewed. They constantly battle stigma and misperceptions. I often tell families that treating the

condition is only half the challenge; the other, more difficult half, is making others understand.

An unfortunate trope in crime fiction, evolving out of these misperceptions, is the antagonist whose actions are driven by mental illness. The man diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder who kills in a "Jekyll and Hyde" rage. The depressed teen who kills herself and frames classmates for her murder. The serial killer who hears voices and has multiple personalities.

Some of these stereotypes are inspired by true stories, sensationalized by the press. But, in truth, people with a psychiatric condition are more likely to be a victim than a perpetrator. Only a very small percentage of severely mentally ill individuals engage in physical violence. In the United States alone, 1 in 5 adults live with a psychiatric condition, equating to roughly 51 million people. That's a lot of people, many of whom are likely to find themselves in difficult situations, possibly even facing threats to their safety, but are less likely to be believed by friends, family, or authorities due to their mental health.

In my medical thriller, "Adverse Effects," two of psychiatrist Dr. Cristina Silva's patients commit suicide after developing psychotic symptoms from an experimental memory drug. As Cristina has been taking the same drug, she starts to experience similar symptoms: false memories, hallucinations, paranoid delusions, and an incessant voice in her head. Despite her status as a physician, due to her condition, no one believes her when she claims someone is *really* after her. This forces her to take actions another, more mentally "stable" individual might not, making her an unreliable narrator but an intriguing and relatable character.

Despite my background, I found it challenging to describe Cristina's symptoms accurately and sensitively. I didn't want to perpetuate stereotypes or belittle individuals with mental illness. Here are some of the lessons I learned:

Avoid caricaturizing mental illness or using derogatory language.

Using terms like "crazy" or "psycho" are offensive, and don't project an image of the character's condition. Similarly, avoid writing the character who is manic throughout the entire book. Mannerisms and characteristics should be sprinkled in, not hammered repeatedly into every scene. A good way to avoid this can be, instead of showing all the symptoms through internal dialogue and reactions, have other characters observe and react to outward signs instead. This has the added benefit of also building the other characters by showing what they notice and how they view mental health.

Focus on person first.

The character is not defined by their condition. They should be fully-fledged individuals whose actions or thoughts may be colored by their condition. Instead of referring to someone as a schizophrenic, say they are a person with schizophrenia. (Note: An exception is the autism community, who see autism as part of their identity and often prefer to be called “autistic persons.”) Also, while the condition may affect the character’s actions or decisions, a mystery/thriller shouldn’t be driven by the diagnosis. The character needs to be relatable, with feelings and thoughts that both make them unique and make the reader want to cheer them on, even have them wondering: “How would I act if I was in the same situation?”

Be specific and get the details right.

Just as describing a character as “Asian” or “religious” tells the reader little about them, so does using a generic term like “mentally ill” or showing them acting “oddly.” Especially for a protagonist, the reader needs to understand the diagnosis to understand what it means for the character and the plot. A main character with anxiety may take the story in a very different direction than one with depression. Whatever diagnosis you choose, make sure you research it carefully by checking the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th edition (DSM-5)* and reading first-hand accounts, both for accuracy and realism and to avoid perpetuating misperceptions. To help you out, let’s look at a few common diagnoses.

DEPRESSION:

Major depression is a feeling of sadness or depressed mood, nearly every day, often associated with loss of appetite or energy, or lost interest in things that normally bring pleasure. Depression often brings feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and may be accompanied by suicidal thoughts. Non-suicidal self-injury, such as cutting, may accompany depression, anxiety, or other mood disorders, as an attempt to deal with emotional pain. The injury brings a moment of calm and release of tension, but then usually results in guilt and shame.

Readers of Gillian Flynn’s “Sharp Objects,” caught up in themes of personality disorders, self-cutting, and Munchausen’s, might miss the fact that Camille Preaker’s depression colors the way she views her family, her love interests, even the murders: “They always call depression the blues, but I would have been happy to waken to a periwinkle outlook. Depression to me is urine yellow, washed out, exhausted miles of weak piss.” Her internal conflict and self-loathing make her an unreliable narrator, and her dispassionate descriptions often make her difficult to like. But at the same time, she feels real, and seeing events unfold through her eyes helps the reader fully understand the depths to which one might descend to uncover the truth about their past and those that damaged them.

ANXIETY/PANIC DISORDERS:

DSM-5 identifies five major types of anxiety disorders: Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Social Phobia. All involve fear or worry out of proportion to actual threats, potentially becoming so severe as to prevent an individual from participating in everyday activities. For example, someone with agoraphobia, a type of panic disorder, might be so afraid of having a panic attack in public or open spaces that they’re unable to leave their home. Anna Fox in “The Woman in the Window,” is such a person, so paralyzed by fear that she sits in her house all day, watching neighbors through a zoom lens. It’s only after she witnesses a murder and authorities fail to believe her because of her psychiatric history that she’s forced to overcome her fears and take matters into her own hands.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is commonly misunderstood. We often hear people say, “I’m obsessed!” or that they’re “compulsive buyers” without full understanding of what those terms really mean. OCD, as defined by DSM-5, requires an individual to experience recurrent and persistent thoughts, urges, or impulses that are often *unwanted* and *intrusive*, and typically cause marked anxiety or distress (obsessions), leading the individual to perform repetitive behaviors or mental acts in response to the obsession in an illogical attempt to prevent something bad from happening (compulsions). Catharine Bailey, the protagonist of “Into the Darkest Corner,” who has both OCD and PTSD, compulsively rechecks the locks and windows in her flat, avoids red clothing, and only shops on certain days. If she notices a curtain doesn’t completely block the interior view from outside, she has to return and start a lengthy checking process all over again. Yet, her OCD causes her to notice tiny details—(AKA: *clues*)—that others might miss.

BIPOLAR DISORDER:

People often mistake anyone who has “mood swings” as having Bipolar Disorder, but this is most often not the case. To meet a DSM-5 diagnosis, one must have experienced at least one true episode of depression (as defined above) and at least one true episode of mania or hypomania, defined as elevated mood for at least four consecutive days, often associated with

feelings of grandiosity, decreased need for sleep, racing thoughts, and risky behavior. Most importantly, the shift in mood is entirely *internal*, not in reaction to a situation, person, or event. Whereas people with anxiety or depression will often shift abruptly from calm to irritable in response to frustration or an environmental change, the person with Bipolar will shift uncontrollably and unpredictably.

In, “And Then You Were Gone,” child psychologist Emily Firestone becomes the primary suspect of her boyfriend’s disappearance. When she finds evidence Paolo was murdered, her mania increases. Her observations and flitting thoughts move the story at break-neck speed, even as she battles self-doubt, fatigue from poor sleep, and the inability to be certain of what she believes is real.

SCHIZOPHRENIA:

Schizophrenia is perhaps the most poorly understood of the psychiatric disorders. Often confused with Dissociative Identity Disorder, it can include “positive symptoms” and “negative symptoms.” This has nothing to do with whether they are beneficial or not, but rather whether they are a *change* in behavior or thoughts (hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech or movements), or a *reduction* in social behavior (withdrawal, flattened affect, psychomotor slowing). There are many different psychotic disorders that can involve some or all of these symptoms. Having multiple personalities is not associated with schizophrenia. In Dan Wells’ supernatural thriller, “The Hollow City,” Michael Shipman has paranoid delusions, hallucinations, and thoughts that make sense to no one but him. He pours water on his alarm clock and avoids all electronics so the Faceless Men can’t monitor him. But it turns out, some of the monsters Michael sees are real. Michael’s struggles to sort truth from fantasy are compelling and believable, putting the reader in the mind of someone with schizophrenia.

DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER:

Formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder, DSM-5 classifies this condition as a dissociation in a person’s thoughts, feelings, actions, or sense of identity, leading the person to have two distinct identities. There must be a gap in the recall of everyday events and personal information, and the person must be distressed or have trouble functioning due to the disorder. The identities often serve as an attempt by the individual’s psyche to manage past trauma or cope with present-day dilemmas, but the disorder cannot be due to medication or drugs, medical illness (like seizures), or part of a normal cultural or religious practice. Perhaps the best example in crime fiction is ‘The Narrator’ in Chuck Palahniuk’s “Fight Club.” An unnamed Narrator, sinking into depression after battling chronic insomnia, works with a mysterious man to create a “fight club” as a form of therapy, only to later discover the other man is an alternate identity the Narrator created. While this poses a creepy and shocking twist, it’s extremely rare for someone with DID to actually see or communicate externally with their alternate identity. What Palahniuk portrays is a confusing crossover between DID and schizophrenia, as the Narrator appears to have profound hallucinations throughout most of the book.

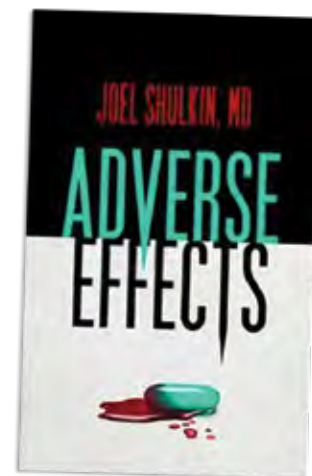
NEURODIVERSITY:

Although classified in DSM-5 as disorders, many consider conditions like Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, and Tourette Syndrome to be part of neurodiversity, particularly when individuals are fully functioning. They are too often caricatured in fiction, emphasizing the atypical features instead of acknowledging the complexity of the individual. It’s uncommon to find protagonists with these conditions in mystery/thrillers. Notable examples include, Lisbeth in “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” and Rory Moore in “Some Choose Darkness”—both characters are autistic. If you’d like to learn more about writing characters with these conditions, however, visit my website at <https://authorjoelshulkin.com>, where you can find links to articles I wrote for Dan Kobold’s *Science in Fiction* blog.

In conclusion, protagonists with psychiatric conditions can be compelling characters who drive the story in new directions. It’s important to be sensitive, specific, and accurate—for the sake of your story and to preserve the dignity of the people you portray. ■

Being a full-time physician hasn’t stopped Joel Shulkin, MD from writing. Far from it. The complexity of his patients, prior service with the United States Air Force, a Master’s in Public Health, and involvement in organized medicine in the middle of an ever-changing healthcare system all provide raw material for his stories.

Joel’s short work has appeared in various print and online journals, and he’s won several awards, including Best Medical Fiction from SEAK and an Honorable Mention from Writer’s Digest Thriller Suspense Competition. He runs the Diagnosis: Fiction Facebook group where writers can seek advice on crafting believable medical scenes from health professionals. “Adverse Effects” is his debut novel.



VANESSA LILLIE on “For the Best”

Interview by John B. Valeri *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Vanessa Lillie took the crime fiction community by storm with the publication of her Amazon-bestselling debut novel, “Little Voices,” in 2019. That book drew comparisons to the likes of Gillian Flynn and Megan Abbott and earned starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Library Journal*. It also introduced elements—a complex female protagonist, Rhode Island as backdrop, and jaw-dropping plot twists that make you go, “Whaaaaa?!?”—that are quickly becoming hallmarks of her fiction.

Originally from Oklahoma, the author—who now makes her home in Rhode Island, where she regularly contributes to the *Providence Journal*—has fifteen years’ marketing and communications experience. She studied English at Rockhurst University (Kansas City, MO) and received a Masters of Public Administration from American University. Lillie spent her early twenties in Washington, D.C., partaking in the “work hard/play hard” lifestyle of a political internship.

Her second novel, “For the Best,” takes its inspiration from those years. Here, Jules Worthington Smith—a successful career woman with a loving

husband and son at home—finds her privileged life on the brink of collapse when she becomes the sole suspect in the murder of a colleague. Worse yet, she was blackout drunk on the night in question and can’t recall pertinent details (such as how her wallet came to be found next to the victim). To clear her name, Jules starts a true crime vlog that becomes a viral sensation—but the deeper she looks, the more she sees. And that clarity comes at a price.

Now, Vanessa Lillie shares *her* perspective on privilege, peril, and plot twists...

John B. Valeri (J.B.V.): “For the Best” is your second (published) novel. How did you find the writing/revision process to compare to that of your first book—and was there anything you learned the first time around that was particularly beneficial here?

Vanessa Lillie (V.L.): *My debut was written with nothing but hope that someone, someday would read it. Whereas my second book was written under contract, which is a very different experience. I’d also heard that your second (published) novel is a tough one, so I wrote it as fast and early as I could. Honestly, it was a hot mess. But my saint of an editor gave me great notes and feedback, so I pretty much rewrote the whole dang thing. I learned that I could write a book that people wanted to read with my debut, and I kept reminding myself of that as I revised my second. I found writing my second book required a mindset to block out imposter syndrome to get the work done.*

J.B.V.: Jules Worthington-Smith is a deeply flawed character. How did you endeavor to balance her unlikable actions/qualities with more redemptive ones so that readers would empathize with her despite her shortcomings?

“Much of this story was an exploration of privilege, particularly white privilege, and how we expect the world to bend for us.”

V.L.: *I had to feel sympathy for her personally to start with and that requires getting to know the character well. My first drafts I definitely did not, so she lacked many of those redemptive qualities that would carry a reader through. Thankfully in revision, I uncovered more about her flaws and even strengths. I'd also say that as I was creating her, I wasn't thinking "likeable" but more "can't look away." I wanted the reader to be turning pages, not because they were hoping everything would work out, but rather, to see how things actually did, and if it was satisfying.*

J.B.V.: Jules and her father struggle with alcohol dependency. In what ways does their drinking heighten the narrative tension—and how did you approach researching/writing the topic so that your depiction would be both authentic and sensitive to the realities of this condition?

V.L.: *Much of this story was an exploration of privilege, particularly white privilege, and how we expect the world to bend for us. While alcoholism is certainly a terrible disease, it's also something that's supported by white privilege, in my opinion—from the excuses and enabling and general culture around drinking. I honestly didn't need to do much research because I spent almost a decade in work hard / drink harder Washington, D.C., plus I have loved people with serious addiction issues, and even found myself leaning on "wine-o'clock" too much in the past. As far as narrative tension, a bottle of booze is like a loaded gun for some people, so it definitely can add to the suspense of a scene.*

J.B.V.: Jules becomes the sole suspect in the murder of a colleague, Terrance Castle. In what ways do the circumstances of the crime and subsequent investigation help to legitimize her sleuthing? Also, how does her vlog lend itself to questions of journalistic ethics?

V.L.: *I don't think what Jules does is legitimate or ethical, but more a Hail Mary or even psychological compulsion for everything to work out for the best as it usually does for someone of her privilege and background. I thought having a blackout was a sort-of worst nightmare scenario for anyone who's had one too many. From there, I wondered how far I'd go (right or wrong) to prove myself innocent of murder and stay out of jail. Further, what would I expect to happen, what privileges would I lean on and what would be stripped away? To me, a vlog allows someone to find a potentially sympathetic audience as well as piece together the case.*

J.B.V.: How does the concept of restorative justice provide a framework for the story—and in what ways might readers find this idea relevant to our current cultural climate?

V.L.: *Restorative justice is a powerful concept that's meant to help heal both the victim of the crime and person who committed it. To me, much of the approach of restorative justice is about empathy and understanding, particularly for the person who committed the crime to see the consequences of their actions. There are larger questions too about what difficulties led that person to take their illegal actions. As far as cultural climate or even just policy making in general, we do not value rehabilitation or meaningfully deal with the "why" of crime. On a personal level, restorative justice also requires accountability, and I think that's also shunned in our culture right now.*





J.B.V.: You are fast becoming known for delivering jaw-droppers that reframe your readers' understanding of what they've read. What are the challenges of developing plot twists that are both credible and surprising—and are these moments pre-plotted or do they occur more organically (or a combination of the two)?

V.L.: *Thank you, that means a lot. My endings are a combination of logic and gut. The big twist at the end of my debut, "Little Voices," came along because the complicated and dark feelings I was exploring weren't fitting with the original ending. The same is true in "For the Best," though*

I knew that ending almost immediately after realizing the crime. I needed an ending that could capture how I felt about the issues of generational privilege I was exploring. I considered many twists and endings, but I kept coming back to the same one that satisfied my heart and head.

J.B.V.: You are a transplant to Rhode Island, which figures prominently as a backdrop in your books. How do you view setting as enhancing narrative—and in what ways has discovering your (then) new state lent itself to your renderings of it on the page?

V.L.: *I'd heard the phrase "setting is a character," but I never really understood it until I moved to Rhode Island. For the years before, I wrote books that will remain shelved and setting was almost more a thing I had to do vs. a true part of the story. But I fell in love with Rhode Island, and when you're in love, you're obsessed and want to talk (or write) about your love all the time. That's especially the case in my debut, but definitely carried over in "For the Best," particularly because it takes place primarily right where I live.*

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

V.L.: *I'm about to go out on submission with another thriller I'm calling "Blood Sisters" that opens and closes in Rhode Island, but mostly takes place in rural Oklahoma where I'm from. The story is about a woman who returns to her hometown ghost town to look for her sister who goes missing on the anniversary of when they were almost killed. Similar to my enthusiasm about Rhode Island in my first two thrillers, I have a longing to share where I grew up, from drugs and casinos to the Native legends and history to environmental disasters that poisoned the land as well as people. There are liars, tigers, and meth dealers, oh my, and I had such a great time writing it.*

We'd like to thank Vanessa for spending time with us. To learn more, check out her website at: www.vanessalillie.com. ■

FOR THE BEST

By Vanessa Lillie

"For the Best" follows Jules Worthington-Smith on a quest to clear her name after the brutal murder of one of her colleagues, Dr. Terrance Castle. The problem? She was the last one to see him alive. The bigger problem? She was blackout drunk and doesn't remember any details of the evening. Especially why her wallet was found next to his body.

She's the CEO of the Poe Foundation, started by her father, who was ousted as a board member years before. When Terrance, a prominent African American professor, is set to receive a grant for his books and speaking tour, his body is found in an alley behind a bar. Jules explains that she was with him that night after her company's fundraiser and he was probably returning the wallet when he was attacked, so the cops have no reason to suspect her. That is, until Terrance's widow, Dez, publicly accuses Jules of the crime.

With the cops doing nothing to find his real murderer, Jules sets out to clear her name and starts a vlog, interviewing people the police won't. As she starts to put together the pieces, she finds out more than she bargained for, like the real reason her father was removed from the board. And Terrance's real plans for the grant, plus insider secrets about his marriage that she would've never suspected.

The final surprising twist in discovering who really killed Terrance, and why, shows that everyone should've been considered a suspect. Even those with no reason to kill him.

This book captured my attention like no other! I was hooked from the very first page. The vlog chapters flowed so well and gave a different perspective on the unreliable narrator that I've never seen before. This follow-up novel from bestselling author Vanessa Lillie proves she doesn't suffer from a sophomore slump. The book has heart and soul and is engaging from beginning to end. Five stars!

Reviewed by Jaime Lynn Hendricks, Author of "Finding Tessa" (Release date 5/11/21) ■

INSPIRED BY ACTUAL EVENTS



JON LAND on Writing

Interview by Joseph Badal for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Rayzor Bachand

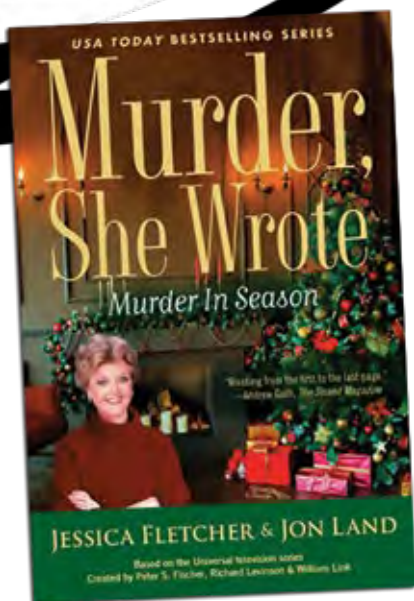
Jon Land is not only a fantastic writer of books that readers have chosen to “never miss,” he’s also a fun interview, to say the least.

With 38 novels under his belt, this *USA Today* bestselling author is responsible for the popular and critically acclaimed *Caitlin Strong* series, as well as the *Blaine McCracken* novels, the *Jared Kimberlain* novels, and the *Ben and Danielle* series. But his hard work doesn’t stop there. Co-authoring several books in the beloved *Murder, She Wrote* series, Jon’s creations have won everything from the 2014 and 2015 International Book Award, to the 2013 USA Best Book Award for Mystery-Suspense, to the 2014 USA Books Best Book Award. In other words, interviewing this amazing mind is a Christmas-worthy “gift.”

Joseph Badal (J.B.): I can’t wait to get into talking with you about your books, but our readers would probably like to learn about how long you’ve been writing novels and how you got started in the business.

Jon Land (J.L.): *Let’s start with the easy part: I wrote my first novel as a senior thesis in my Honors English and American Literature concentration at Brown University. It really sucked but it taught me two things: I could write a book and I loved writing thrillers. Backing up a bit, my career as a novelist grew out of both a love for writing and reading, particularly thrillers. Beyond that, also while in college, I fell in love with the notion of seeing my name in print. My first published article appeared in People magazine in January of 1978. They changed every single word of what I submitted except the most important thing: JON LAND!!!!*

J.B.: To describe you as being a prolific writer seems to be a gross understatement. Please tell us about your writing process.



Do you write every day? For how many hours? Do you have a time target for when you want to release a book?

J.L.: Again, I'll start with the second question. The best time for a book to come out is...the best time for that book to come out. As professionals, we have to rely on the publisher doing what's in our and their best interests when scheduling a book for a month and/or a season. But there are times when the theme of a book, especially in non-fiction, cries out for a definitive month. That's not so much the case in fiction, but I'll always remember something John Grisham said in answer to the question: "What makes a bestselling author?" He replied: "Write a book every year that gets released the same time every year." Of course, that was years ago and a lot has changed since then.

As for my process, I work every day, I don't necessarily write every day because, as all writers know, this business is about promotion, marketing, and social media often as much as it is about writing. I will say that I'm happiest when I am writing because, unlike a lot of writers, I love the process itself. I write without an outline, knowing where I'm going around 80 pages at a time. And I also write fast, sometimes as much as 5,000 words in a single day, although my average is probably somewhere around 3,500. When something I write surprises me, I know that it's going to surprise you.

J.B.: I've read all your books in the Caitlin Strong series. It's obvious to me that you have a thing going with Caitlin. Tell us about Caitlin and if she was inspired by one or more women you've met.

J.L.: Ha-Ha! I'm laughing because, speaking of one of the points I raised above, Caitlin was inspired by a business and marketing decision. At a meeting to determine what I was going to do next for my publisher, Forge, the head of mass market sales (there were mass market books, believe it or not, back in 2008) mentioned that thrillers made up the most popular genre, and women bought around 70% of all books. But nobody at the table could name a single action thriller female series hero, you know...like a female Jack Reacher. So right on the spot I said, "What about a female Texas Ranger? And why don't we call her Caitlin Strong?" It was one of those rare heavenly moments!

J.B.: What have been the challenges associated with writing about a strong female character? Do you find developing a female protagonist different from developing a male protagonist?

J.L.: The problem I have with male thriller heroes, having written a whole bunch of them, is so many of them are generally the same: Navy SEALs, Green Berets, Marines—guys we expect to be tough, which takes a lot of the heavy lifting out. Writing a woman like Caitlin is much more fun because women aren't often perceived as having what it takes to be gunfighters. And writing a female gunfighter is a blast because it's outside people's expectations. And, since she's a Texas Ranger, there's enough credibility there to make people buy into her attitude and her actions.

J.B.: You've placed Caitlin in several locations. First, why Texas?

J.L.: That's an easy one. The decision was made once I decided to make her a Texas Ranger. Beyond that, Texas is so big and so diverse, it's one of the few states you can set an entire series in and never feel that it's stale. I also write the Murder, She Wrote series and one of the biggest things I've done with the brand is similarly base every book in Cabot Cove, Maine. I think readers appreciate a familiarity of setting in a series, like Spenser (Boston),

“So right on the spot I said, ‘What about a female Texas Ranger? And why don't we call her Caitlin Strong?’ It was one of those rare heavenly moments!”



Dave Robicheaux (Louisiana), Travis Magee (Florida), and so many more. The setting becomes as much a part of the brand as the character.

J.B.: You've located Caitlin in several overseas locations. How do you perform your research for those locations? Do you do on-site research?

J.L.: I used to do tons of on-site research BG—that stands for “Before Google”! You’ll remember that I mentioned I wrote my first novel as a senior thesis. Well, my mentor, the great Professor Elmer Blistein—in that book and every book I wrote that he read until he passed away—was able to tell me all the places I went to and the places I didn’t. He would say research can get you the sights and even the sounds, but it can’t get you the smells. So even when I don’t visit a place I’m writing about, I’m diligent about capturing the smells to create the illusion that I know the setting a lot better than I actually do. That said, I’ve been to Texas a dozen times now and rely heavily on first-hand research to craft Caitlin’s adventures.

J.B.: The plot lines of your books appear to be inspired by current events, such as terrorism, drug operations, etc. Please give us an example of where an actual event released your creative juices and inspired you to base a novel on that event.

J.L.: I’m not sure if inspiration is the right word; it’s more, again, about the brand and the eventual marketing campaign. Fiction can be extremely challenging to sell in large part because...how do you get media to pay attention if you’re not famous or a big-time bestselling author, neither of which describes me. So, I try to make up for that by mixing in current events to give both readers more of a reason to read the book and, equally important, to give media a reason to cover the book, sometimes by actually covering the book’s subject more than the content.

J.B.: You’ve written several series. At what point do you decide that it’s time to end a series and move on to something else?

J.L.: Since we’re being totally truthful, the truth here is that I’ve never decided to end a series—my publisher has decided to end a series when sales started to slip below their expectations. I did nine books in the Blaine McCracken series—five with Fawcett and four with Forge—and for a long time they sold a ton, until they didn’t anymore and it was time to move on. But when Open Road brought out the first five titles in the series for the first time ever as Ebooks, they sold a ton again, and I ended up bringing McCracken back for two new adventures for the same company. Here’s the thing: For me, creative decisions are dictated by the realities of a business that’s difficult, and often impossible, to achieve success in.

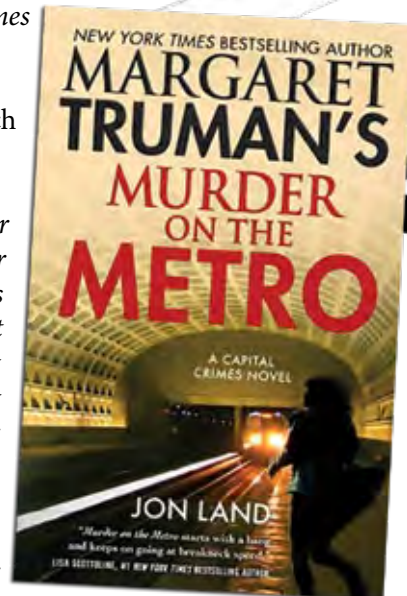
J.B.: What authors, past or present, have inspired you? Would you like to have your work compared to any other author’s work? If so, who would that author be?

J.L.: Wow, there are so many, especially when you throw in movies. I raise that because the biggest true inspiration for my career were the early James Bond movies that starred Sean Connery (the only Bond!). When I was a little kid back in the 60s, the studio would re-release double features every few months and my father took me every single time they came to town. I fell in love with that style and format and that’s crucial because no writer has their own style when they start out, so we all start by imitating others—as Victor Hugo famously said, “Good writers borrow, but great writers steal.” So, to answer your question, let me mention some of the authors I used to steal from and some I continue to steal from: Stephen King, David Morrell, Clive Cussler, Robert Ludlum, Lee Child, James Lee Burke, Ian Fleming, James Rollins, Steve Berry, and Alistair MacClean. Speaking of MacClean, I still look to the film version of “Ice Station Zebra” as an example of a perfect thriller structure. I’ve probably been compared to all of them at some point (well, maybe not King so much), and always consider it a great compliment.

J.B.: Jon, what are you working on now and when can we look forward to its release?

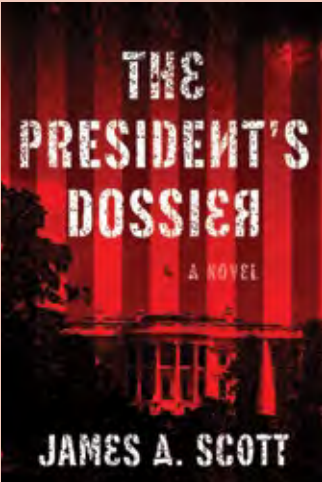
J.L.: Glad you asked! February will see the release of “Murder on the Metro,” my first book in Margaret Truman’s Capital Crimes series. Hey, when your own name isn’t big enough to reach the New York Times bestseller list, try someone else’s!

Jon is a 1979 graduate of Brown University, lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and can be found on the Web at jonlandbooks.com or on Twitter @jondland. ■



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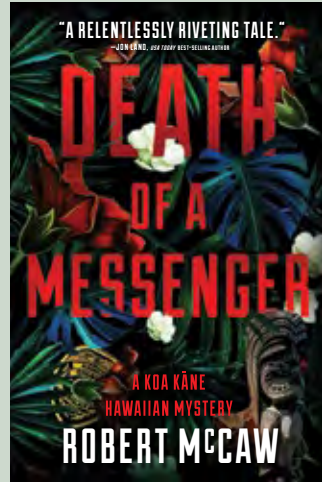
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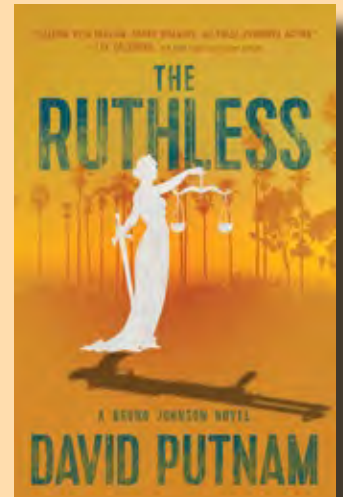
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USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



Journey deep into the exotic locales of Hawaii's Big Island to discover its language, culture—and crime

"Raw, powerful, and eloquent."

—MICHAEL CONNELLY
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



Bruno Johnson, shaken to his core, but still a formidable force—an unrelenting focus on doing the right thing—unwilling to let anyone or anything stand in his way.

VICTORIA THOMPSON

The Well-Played Con Comes Alive in "City of Schemes"

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Monica Z. Photography



Elizabeth Miles is preparing for her wedding to Gideon Bates when readers join her in this latest book from the incredible *Counterfeit Lady* series written by bestselling author, Victoria Thompson. Shadows from Ms. Miles' past come out of nowhere and threaten to destroy the life she's worked so hard to build. Once again, she must utilize her own unique "con artist" menu of skills in order to expose one of the richest, most memorable mysteries written.

Catching up with the incredible creator of this, as well as the fascinating *Gaslight* series, *Suspense Radio* welcomed Victoria Thompson to the show for the first time to learn all about her background, her newest tale, and what her fans can look forward to when the New Year comes to call.

John Raab (J.R.): It is a pleasure to welcome Victoria Thompson to the show today in order to speak about her brand-new book—the fourth tale in the fantastic *Counterfeit Lady* series—"City of Schemes." It is great having you here.

Victoria Thompson (V.T.): *It's great to be here. Thank you for having me!*

J.R.: I am so excited because I have to say, I love the era you write about. I got into this series when they sent along "City of Scoundrels" and I became immediately hooked. Tell us a bit about what we can expect from this latest story.

V.T.: Elizabeth, my heroine, is called a counterfeit lady because she's actually a very good con artist who ended up "converting" her ways, so to speak, when she was thrown in jail with suffragettes who were arrested for demonstrating outside the White House. She decided back then to become a part of the movement and go straight; she now only uses her unique skills as a con artist to help other people attain justice who wouldn't normally be able to do so. Each of the four books has revolved around a certain kind of con that helps do just that. In this latest one, I knew I wanted to use the "Spanish Prisoner Con," which is one of the oldest and one of my personal favorites; it seemed like it would be a lot of fun to wrap a story around.

When I begin a book, I don't plot out the story beforehand. All I know is what the con will be and go from there. With this, however, I ended up noticing at the end that I had written three different storylines that used this same con; I also realized that I could wrap the stories up in only one paragraph, which meant I would cut my book down to about half of what it was supposed to be.

J.R.: Uh, oh...a novella.

V.T.: *Exactly. So, I sat down with a piece of paper and a pencil and drew a chart of all three cons—who was involved and how they were connected. And I was so excited because I discovered that each one complimented and complicated the others. So, the second half of the book is about bringing them all together. It was a whole lot of fun, and I can't wait for readers to get their hands on it and have a good time.*

J.R.: Considering your books, I would guess you must be a real fan of *The Sting*.

V.T.: *Oh, yes. Very much so. Actually, there was a book written by a con man that the movie was based on, and a lot of the things that I thought were clever in that movie were things that real con artists did all the time. Especially when it came to faking their own deaths; they used that ending all the time. If the mark thought they were dead, they wouldn't come after them, so a great many con men got themselves out of a problem and free by setting up their own fake death.*

J.R.: One of the things I love with your *Gaslight* series is the setting that you chose. Being around WWI, with no modern-day technology at your disposal, the characters truly have to shine through. When you were thinking about writing another series, why did you want to set it in the same period? Is there something that specifically excites you about that era?

V.T.: *Actually, these are around 1917; the *Gaslight* books begin in 1894, and they've just gotten up to 1900 now. But the reason I started it in 1894 was because it was a really interesting time. Teddy Roosevelt was the Commissioner of Police and things were very different around the turn of the century. The odd part, however, is that even though so much has changed, the issues we are fighting for and care about now are still very much the same as they were back then.*

Immigration is still a huge concern and a huge issue; every wave of immigrants that came to the U.S. experienced the same exact kind of prejudice as they do today. Another topic is the whole "Finding Mr. Right" for women. Back then, they would be "set-up" hoping that they would meet Mr. Right, yet end up in a dangerous situation instead, which is still happening today. So, technology may be completely different, yes, but the actual issues of humanity we are worried about today are the same as they were back then.

*And when it comes to the *Counterfeit Lady* series, women were fighting for their legal right to vote back then, yet here we are in 2020/2021, and we are still fighting for equality in a variety of ways. It's actually kind of fun to deal with these issues historically knowing what happened, because then I can at least write about our accomplishments back then and how we succeeded in various areas, whereas now, we're just waiting for our next accomplishment.*

J.R.: I never thought of it that way; that was enlightening. I didn't think the choice of the setting was so personal.

V.T.: *I think a book is just as personal to the person who reads it as it is to the author, because readers bring their own experiences to it; they see something different in each book and will be touched in different ways because of what they have gone through personally.*

J.R.: I also love that you make all of your settings, Upper Manhattan, Lower Manhattan, etc., into their very own character. Do you consciously do that?

V.T.: *Yes, actually. I mean...when you think about it, New York City is a character and every neighborhood has its own backstory and its own ambiance. It is so rich in history that it's almost impossible for it not to become its own character. Being one of the oldest places in the New World, NYC was settled so long ago and grew so much, but its' original stories have affected what it became. I mean...this was all farmland; Harlem is actually Dutch for "farm." And Wall Street actually got that name because there was a very real wall built there at one time to keep the cows from wandering downtown and getting in the way of traffic. Each historical tidbit is so great that, by using NYC, the research becomes even more fun. I love finding out all these little facts*



"I always tell my students that when it comes to the villain, they have to remember that he is the hero of his own story. Bad people don't think they're bad."

and "dropping" them into the stories. I feel like I get to enter a secret world, and the readers get a kick out of them because they get to learn some new, fun things.

J.R.: I live in L.A. and we have that type of thing here, as well. I mean, we're not as old as NYC, of course, but the new and the old still collide here. With your books it's almost like the reader is stepping into a time machine and getting to see it all as it played out.

V.T.: *I'm glad of that, too. I mean, I have tried writing contemporary fiction but I just can't seem to get it right. I'm old fashioned and I like it better that way.*

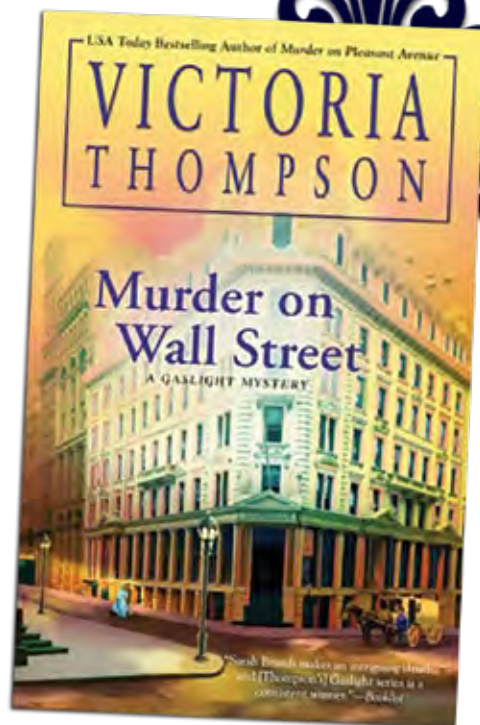
J.R.: Well, let us talk about Elizabeth. She's a complex character, to say the least. So, when you first began to mold her out of clay, so to speak, how did you go about doing it? What were the traits she needed in order to be the counterfeit lady you had in mind?

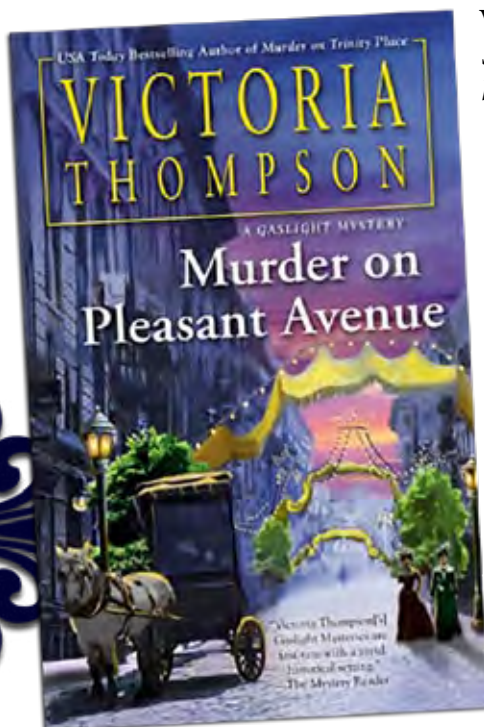
V.T.: *Above all, I wanted to make her honest and true to her own set of values. Which are very different from most peoples, of course. (LOL) She was raised to lie very easily and to think all people are suckers. Con men have this saying: "You can't cheat an honest man." And they really do believe that there are no honest men. Elizabeth always believed that, yet she did meet a very honest man and ended up falling in love with him completely. Talk about opposites attract. She lets him help her with her cons sometimes, but this is truly a man who cannot lie. No matter how hard he tries, he would never be able to do it, so there's not a lot he can help her with.*

When I first started talking to my editor about this new series, she advised me to look at the early 20th century when doing my research. What I came across was the story of Consuelo Vanderbilt, whose mother married her off to an English Duke that she'd known for maybe five minutes and then sent her away to live with him. She became a suffragette in England and her mother became one in America, and that's how I learned so much about this movement. I read these stories and what these women endured and thought it was cool; I wanted others to know about it, but I didn't want it to read like a textbook. I wanted to make it interesting.

I had researched con artists for a different book several years earlier, so I put two and two together and started to see if there were female con artists back then. I found out that there were, even though there weren't many. From these two avenues, Elizabeth was born.

J.R.: Now, let's talk villains, because the bad guys are always a big part of the story. When you're researching a bad guy, what are the traits you want to make sure they have?





V.T.: *It's funny you ask this because when I teach my master's class in fiction writing at Seton Hill University, I always tell my students that when it comes to the villain, they have to remember that he is the hero of his own story. Bad people don't think they're bad. Once you understand that one thing, then it's much easier to create that villain; it's easier to tell the story through his eyes. You can literally tap into the heart of evil that way.*

J.R.: When you're creating the villain and you know it has to tangle with Elizabeth, do you know the strengths and weaknesses beforehand that the other character can exploit during the story in order to win?

V.T.: *Wow...that's a very good question. At the con artist's core is making the mark believe the story they tell them. And so, that's what I think Elizabeth is really good at—tricking the villain and making him believe her story. She does have to find a weakness first in order to exploit it, that's true. And we as humans, I must say, are minimalists. It's usually either love or money or revenge, and Elizabeth just needs to find the right button.*

J.R.: So, when you were thinking of this for "City of Schemes," you must have been thinking about what villain would best fit in with the con you chose.

V.T.: *Exactly...and there are several in this that each get their comeuppance; with three storylines and three villains, this is a bit worse for the bad guys than in the others.*

J.R.: With many authors who write full-time, this lockdown hasn't seemed to have really affected them. Is that the same for you?

V.T.: *Still writing; that hasn't been affected. I do have "Murder on Wall Street" coming in April. We'll see, anyway. Publishing schedules have been fluid lately. I'm also writing the next Counterfeit Lady book right now. It's called "City of Shadows" and is set right after WWI has ended, when using otherworldly means was popular to try and contact beloved ones who died while at war.*

Although writing hasn't been affected, I have actually found this state of the pandemic very stressful. I mean, my work hasn't changed, but not being able to do a lot of things has really bothered me. I feel like it's the silent stress of it all. I took the summer off and made a light schedule for writing this new book because I allowed myself enough time to get it done so I didn't have to stress. Another thing is that I usually love to read mysteries and darker thrillers, but this lockdown has made me not want to read them at all. I actually gorged on light romances this summer because I wanted "happy endings."

J.R.: I understand completely, actually. I've been turning to more fantasy fiction.

V.T.: *Right...they're like palette cleansers; reading for escape.*

J.R.: And, luckily, we have a lot of choices out there. Now, fans and readers should head to your website for the latest information, correct?

V.T.: *That's it. All the books are there in order, so you can choose where to start, etc. And "City of Schemes" will also be there available, on audio as well.*

J.R.: Thank you so much. It has been a real pleasure speaking with you.

V.T.: *You too. Enjoy the holidays.*

To learn all there is to know about events, upcoming books, and the two incredible series available to dive right into, head to www.VictoriaThompson.com. And to listen to other interviews with many creative geniuses, stop by: Suspense Radio on iTunes and Spotify at <https://www.launchpaddm.com/pd/Suspense-Radio>. ■

LISA GARDNER

INTRODUCES AN “EVERYDAY” HEROINE IN HER LATEST THRILLER

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Monica Z. Photography



Lisa Gardner is most certainly a well-known name in the world of detective-oriented crime thrillers. Penning many popular series that have pole-vaulted her heroines to the top of the bestseller lists, such as Boston Homicide Detective D.D. Warren, Lisa Gardner has now started a new series that, in her words, stars an “everyday” female taking on a task of monumental proportions. She recently ‘stopped by’ to speak with John Raab and Jeff Ayers at *Suspense Radio* to discuss the first book in this series, “Before She Disappeared,” as well as other projects and upcoming events.

John Raab (J.R.): Hey everybody. Well, it’s wintertime again, so it’s no surprise to be sitting down and welcoming Lisa Gardner back to our show.

Lisa Gardner (L.G.): *I am your winter girl, I guess. (LOL)*

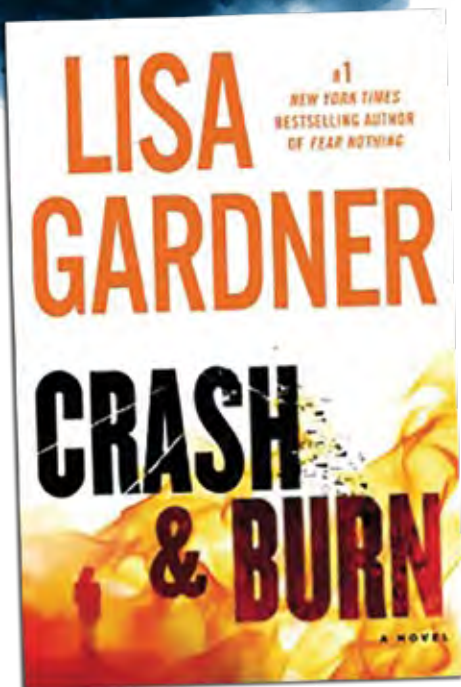
J.R.: You certainly are, and this time around you brought us a little bit of a surprise with “Before She Disappeared.” So, let us dive into

this new character, Frankie Elkin, and see what mischiefs you have for readers going on in this one.

L.G.: *Absolutely. I have been known for writing about my detectives, like D.D. Warren, but this character came about from an entirely different place. As a novelist, I draw my inspiration from real life cases and a couple of years back, I read a story about this woman on a reservation who had started searching for a missing woman—a fellow Indian—that everyone had given up on ever finding. While researching, I began going down the rabbit hole, so to speak, and learning just how many of these cases ended up as cold cases. In the missing persons world, ethnicity makes a huge difference when it comes to the amount of effort, time, and resources that are being spent to find you. It is sad how many men, women and children go missing, and stay missing, because of the color of their skin.*

That’s actually what inspired this woman by the name of Lisa “Yellowbird” Chase in real life to give up her worldly belongings. She has a trailer and goes from place to place and case to case now as an amateur sleuth, and has a lot of success solving these cold cases; her story just fascinated me. Not only the need to tell this story, which I think we can all agree is topical, especially in this last year; but also, it





allowed me to look at a story from a different direction. I have always had the police perspective in my books, so I had to ask myself: “What would it be like to solve cases if you were an everyday person?” Like Lisa “Yellowbird” Chase will tell you, from her point of view, the everyday persons’ relationship with the police is quite adversarial. And, from the professionals POV, like with my D.D. Warren, they feel that way, too: they don’t want amateurs showing up and messing with their case. At the same time, the families can often be squeamish because, who do you look at first when there is a murder or a crime? The people closest to the victim. Therefore, it’s a very high conflict calling to be an amateur who does this and has to deal with the things that come up.

All of this captured my attention and I knew the book I had to write next. And that’s how Frankie Elkin came to be. She’s a middle-aged woman who I describe as having no belongings and this is what she does now—goes from town to town trying to solve those cases that have fallen through the cracks. In this first book, she ends up in Boston; an area I know well because of the D.D. Warren books. It’s set in Mattapan (nicknamed ‘Murderpan’ because of its high crime rate), and she’s there to find a fifteen-year-old Haitian immigrant girl who went missing. The story takes off from there.

Jeff Ayers (J.A.): I’m curious. With this open canvas of a loner on the road, what made you decide to keep the area around Boston as your setting?

L.G.: It became clear that this was not a good time to “travel” anywhere in this world. And to be fair, being that this was the first book and I know the neighborhoods of Boston so well, it just made more sense. I do know a great deal about the Haitian immigrants around the area and the problems they face, which were in the headlines a lot about two years ago when their ten-year visas that gave them temporary protective status were up. The Haitian immigrant group is incredible in Mattapan; they are a majority of the primary healthcare workers there and the locals do not want them deported, even though our federal administration does favor deportation. So, this was another factor that drew me in and made me even more aware of the struggles in Mattapan. To this day, they are still in limbo; I wonder how difficult that must be to wake up every morning and not really know how to settle and build a life when you don’t even know if you’ll be here tomorrow? It’s all very poignant to me.

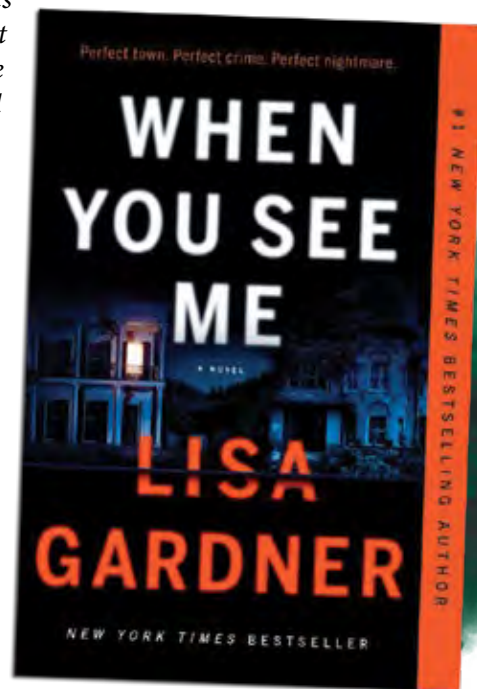
J.R.: Now, you had to build Frankie up and give her a background, etc. When you decided that she was going to go on this crusade to help others, how did you make her care? What motivates her?

L.G.: When I write any books and mold a plot, I ask myself: What happened to this family? What made them disappear? What made them become who they are? I felt the core question for me with Frankie was: Who, exactly, is she? I got to build the character as I went. Everywhere she goes there is skepticism. People don’t understand who she is and why she doesn’t want to sell a story to the media and get money for it; they just can’t understand her motives. She’s a complete loner and drifter, so she has no outward signs of why she’s involved in this. One reason that is revealed up front is that she’s a recovering alcoholic who has basically replaced her obsession to drink with her obsession to solve cases.

I also find her a very interesting character in this day and age because she’s living the anti-life: not married, no career, no kids...she’s abandoned those aspects of life and, in doing so, has found herself. To me, that makes her really compelling.

J.A.: You write such memorable characters that are flawed, per se, which means “realistic” to me. What part of you is able to convey such deeply emotional characters on the page?

L.G.: It was fun, I have to say, to do a real person instead of a cop. I consider D.D. Warren to be my alter ego when I write her; she’s a hard ass, whereas I try to avoid conflict. I like Flora Dane because she’s kick ass; if I was a Marvel superhero for the



day, I would totally want to be her. When it comes to Frankie, however, she's just... one of us. The basic human. And you're right. She's vulnerable, and that's actually the term I used and felt when writing her. She's trying to figure out life and some days are better than others. She needs a purpose. At one point she works as a bartender, great job for a drifter, even an alcoholic one, and she's in this room surrounded by people yet feeling like an outsider. These people, to her, know the secret of life. They know who they are, what they're supposed to do and achieve, etc. This remains a mystery to her, so she helps herself by finding another missing persons' case to solve in order to make her feel better.

Much like me, Jeff, because I like getting out of my own head and into another's, it was fun to put Frankie on the page with all of her thoughts and confusion and the need to keep solving these cases in order to have a point to her life.

J.R.: When you were doing research, did you ever get a twinkle in your eye and suddenly want to write a nonfiction book on a specific subject?

L.G.: Actually, no. I love to read nonfiction. I love research and it's often inspirational for me, but I'm not that obsessive when it comes to details. I don't have the patience for all that fact-checking that would be involved. When I like a nonfiction idea, I then want to fictionalize it and do it my way!



J.A.: A regular argument John and I have is when it comes to 'series versus standalone.' Because of the way you write and how you introduce people in various places, is it possible Frankie will cross paths with D.D. one day?

L.G.: I understand your point on that. It's much like the "taste great, less filling" debate. I guess in my mind I'm a plot and character driven writer and I don't care about the rest, like if it will be marketable or a commercial success. (My poor publisher will be sitting there right now going, REALLY?) If something fits and I want D.D. or some other character to do it, I just write it. Right now, I'm writing the next Frankie book which means she'll clearly be hanging around for a while, but I don't plan ahead when it comes to series or standalone. And if all of my characters happen to converge in one book someday, that will be fun. I also like series because I like the voices in my head and want to spend more time with them than what one book would allow.

J.R.: And because of what they do, it would really be no surprise to see them cross paths one day.

L.G.: Exactly. Although Frankie is not from Boston, even though book number one is set there, she will be off and running to a new location, out west this time around. I'm committing to her and the life she's chosen, which means she has to move around. I'm not even sure where this is set yet. Currently, all I know is it's in the west and is a place with lots of dead bodies.

J.R.: Well, you got a lot of places to choose from out here. From reservations to towns to those Utah monoliths that have been popping up all over the place.

L.G.: And it may end up being a fictional town name, anyway. When I was writing "When You See Me," the reader knew it was set in Georgia in this town of pure evil, but I made up the name. When I do diabolical things, I don't want to traumatize some very real-life camp or lodge or resort.

J.R.: This was your first 'blank canvas' in a while, though. What is the biggest challenge when creating a new venture from scratch?

L.G.: The most difficult was it not being a police procedural. For the first time in a long time, I had to try and think of what a normal person would do and how they'd go about doing it. I didn't want Frankie to be a hacker and use technology to solve things; sometimes I think that's a real cheat. Way back when I began, one of my first editors said that the reason behind my crime or the police's lack to solve the crime should never be because the investigators were stupid. That's just lazy suspense. So, with Frankie, I would have to know the logical things that police would have done or had to know about when the case first occurred and why the case went "cold." Then I had to find a way to make this teen disappear and not have the police able to find her. Then, Frankie

“When I write any books and mold a plot, I ask myself: What happened to this family? What made them disappear? What made them become who they are?”

comes along, so I had to figure out what she'd do differently than the professionals that would allow her to solve the case months later. It was fun, and some days really intimidating, to put together this investigation that an everyday person had to pull off.

J.A.: You can go really dark in your psychological world, but you still show the light and keep the hope there for the reader. Others, who I will not name, write psychological thrillers and get so dark that sometimes I have to put down the book and go take a shower because it's just gotten way too much. How do you keep that balance?

L.G.: *I'm with you, Jeff, in terms of personal taste. I don't want to read anything that's hopeless. I'm an avid reader, so a good proxy for our own readers. I'm also the normal person who has had long, harried days where the last thing I want to do is crack open the cover of my entertainment at night just to be even more depressed or angry. So, Frankie can have a bad day and not know what to do, but she always has to have hope. I am well aware of that line because I don't want to step over it or lose it while I'm writing.*

J.R.: With this “shut-in” state during the pandemic, have you gotten to write more, or taken up any new hobbies?

L.G.: *Well, if you follow my social media, it will lead you to believe that I'm not writing any novels because I'm always on a mountain somewhere. I've been hiking a lot, like I always did, but the need became even greater with this pandemic. I live in New Hampshire, and the Granite State is about as kind to your knees as it sounds (LOL), so I am happy that it's now snowing. I'm an outdoor person, so I will type furiously and then bolt outside as fast as possible. I haven't taken up any new hobbies, yet I did join with the rest of the population and began to watch The Queen's Gambit, which I love.*

J.R.: When it comes to your books on audio, do your narrator choices change; will there be a new narrator for Frankie?

L.G.: *It will be a new narrator. This is a first-person book and, for the record, this is the first book I've ever written that's entirely first-person. We did have a conversation about this a while back because there's a lot of soul searching in the publishing industry right now on how to be more inclusive and authentic when it comes to audio versions. A struggle with Frankie was that she was in a Haitian community and you want to make things sound authentic, so it's a judgement call from the audible perspective on how not to make it sound imitative or fake.*

J.A.: Your book covers are so different when it comes to the U.S. versus the U.K. versions; who decides that?

L.G.: *It's interesting you say that because this new book for Frankie is the very first one where the U.S. and U.K. versions actually look very similar. They say it's because in the U.K. the market wants that more thriller/blood-soaked/shocking cover, whereas in the U.S., we want to make the thriller appeal to fiction readers of all genres. I have loved my covers, though. The graphic arts department at Dutton has been brilliant when it comes to the artwork and the special effects over the years. Of course, with the financial constraints now, hardcovers might change completely down the road.*

J.R.: What should fans and readers know about coming up?

L.G.: *The virtual tour information will be launching on the website in the next week, and there are still opportunities to get signed books; so, if you want to keep those signed book collections going, you can. The “Kill A Friend” contest is also there where your buddy, pal, family member, yourself, etc., can nominate you to die in one of my books. It's highly competitive now, but still a whole lot of fun.*

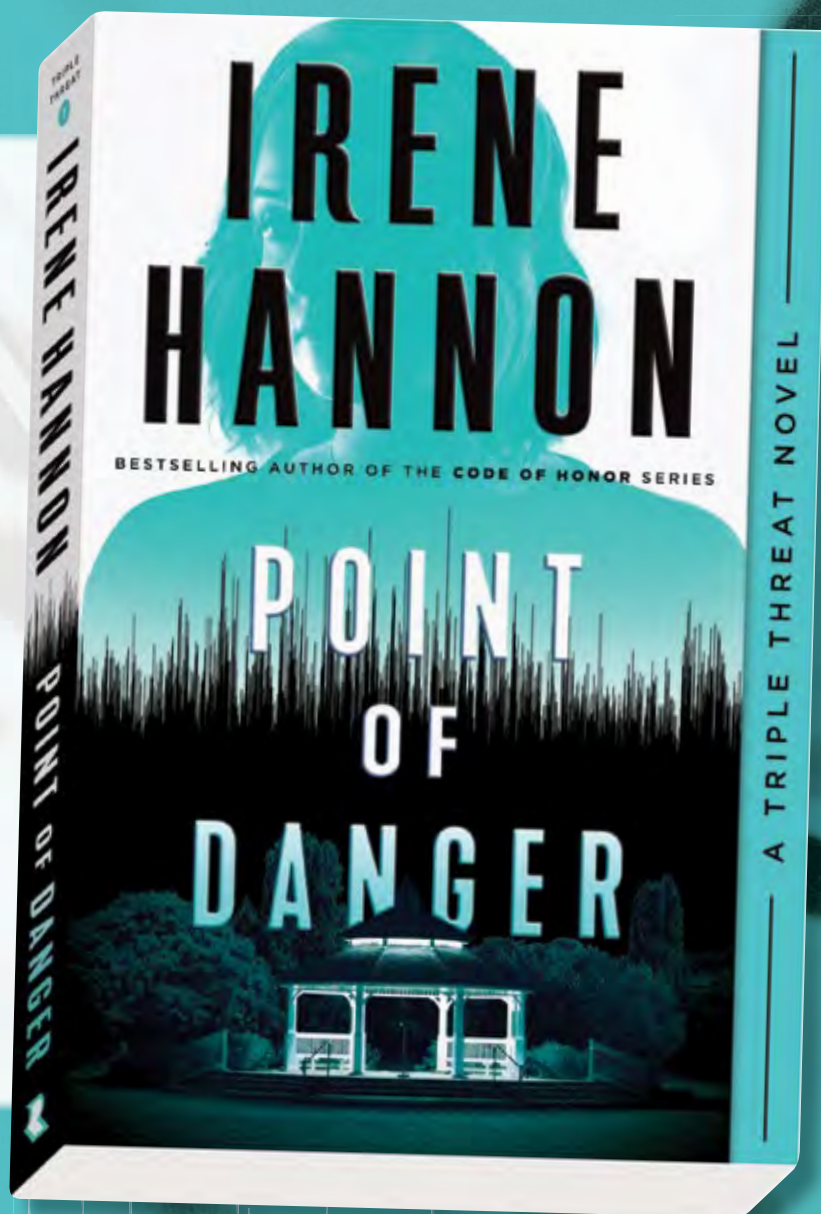
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HATE MAIL WAS ONE THING. THIS WAS *QUITE* ANOTHER.

Radio talk show host Eve Reilly is used to backlash from her pot-stirring on-air commentary and interviews. But now it seems a disgruntled listener is resorting to more than angry words to express their displeasure. When a suspicious package arrives on her doorstep, Eve turns to law enforcement for help.

Police detective Brent Lange can't find any evidence to link the string of unsettling incidents that follows, but he's convinced they're connected. As the harassment grows more menacing, it becomes clear someone wants Eve's voice silenced—permanently.

But unless he can track down her foe, fast, the gutsy woman who is willing to take risks for what she believes—and who is swiftly winning his heart—may not survive.

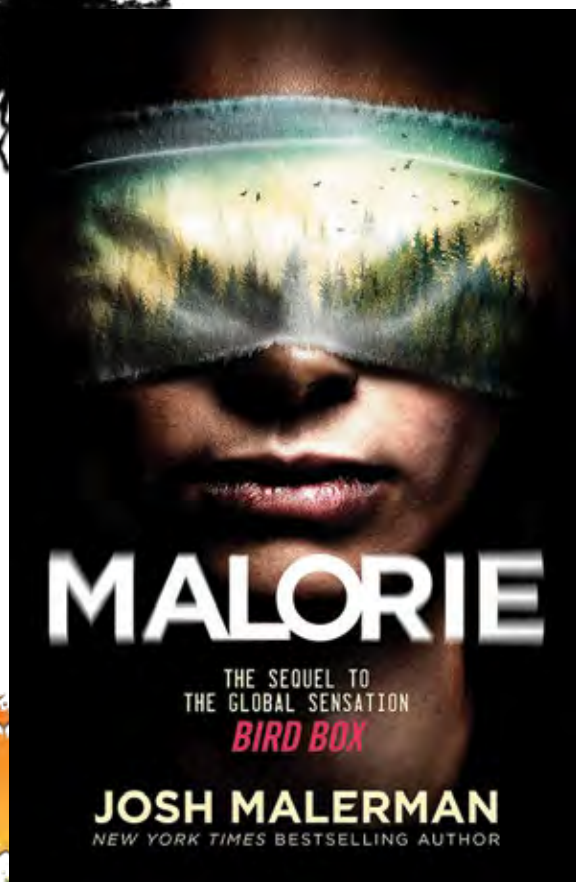


IreneHannon.com

RULES OF FICTION

“Malorie, Trauma, and Unseen Horror”

By Ken Brosky



Pity the people forced to live inside Josh Malerman’s “Bird Box.” There are creatures everywhere; their very presence is capable of dismantling society as we know it. Worse yet, there seems to be no way to fight back because simply looking at the creatures is a death sentence. And it’s not the creatures themselves that kill...no, it’s the mental snap that does everyone in. Look at these creatures once—even just a fleeting glance—and your mind turns on you, convincing you to kill yourself.

It’s a terrifying situation, one that Malerman played up incredibly well in “Bird Box.” With the sequel, “Malorie,” he does something just as extraordinary: he explores the traumatic effect this world has placed upon its survivors. Malorie, a mother of two, quickly learns that the promise of safety is nothing more than an illusion in this new world. It isn’t long before chaos befalls the sanctuary she reached at the end of the first novel. This leads Malorie down a dark road, one she traverses with her two children—now teenagers who have known only the forced blindness of this new world.

Malorie is traumatized. Wouldn’t you be, dear reader, if your sight was stolen from you forever? Unable to see the terror that you know lurks everywhere? And it’s this character development that makes “Malorie” such a fun, great novel. Our titular hero has changed over time—as all characters should—but not in a clichéd sort of way. You’d expect her to be smarter about survival, maybe even tougher—and, to some extent, she is! In an inferior novel (or pretty much any mediocre movie), this

would be the extent of her character development. But Malorie is so much more. She’s hurting. She’s also scared, unable to shake her paranoia, and unwilling to trust her children to do the right thing.

Malorie has scared the teens deeply with her descriptions of what real madness could be. Like how the madman doesn’t know his mind is cracked; how that’s exactly what makes him mad. And how maybe, just *maybe* when they touch you, you go mad slowly instead.

Malorie is facing her own monsters within. She’s terrified her children will open their eyes, willing to go so far as to treat them badly if it means keeping them safe. She’s made trade-offs with motherhood, and her children resent her for it. It isn’t long before this friction boils over. Even when hope arrives in the form of a rumor—a train, still running, that takes people to a safe place—Malorie has her doubts. She’s been down this road too often....

This will end in madness. Because it always does. When Malorie is around other people, someone makes a mistake. Someone tries something they shouldn’t. Someone believes something they shouldn’t.... The old constructs of good and bad have long been replaced with safe and unsafe.

Malorie and her children feel like real people, and it makes following their story so much better because, truthfully,

characters that feel like people are the best characters.

Character development is such a tricky thing. It requires writers to know their characters well enough to understand how events might change them and shape their beliefs. This is what turns a character into a person. For any writer, this can be a challenge. But there's an old writing exercise that can be especially useful if you want to practice character development.

Writing Exercise: "The Metamorphosis"

The first thing you need is a character. If you want to create your own but don't know where to start, try this Character Questionnaire from the Gotham Writers Workshop. If you already have a character in a story or novel you're writing, that's fine. If you want to use a character from pop culture (for example, R.J. MacReady from "The Thing"), that works too!

The goal is to develop a scene when either:

- A) The character's sense of self is threatened or changed by an external or internal event.
- B) The character's opinion of someone else changes as the result of a meaningful moment.
- C) The character confronts someone or something that affects their values (either negatively or positively).

Notice, already, that the character of Malorie has experienced all three.

The goal is to make this simple, so pick one event as a starting point. Maybe your character is the passenger in a drunk-driving accident. How do they react? Do they call the police? Try to cover it up? How does that affect their perception of the driver (a loved one or a friend or a sibling)? Another idea: put your character in a bar where a fight gets out of control...trust me, you'll have a blast writing it.

Let your character react to the event in a meaningful way. In other words, don't let the character simply "roll with the punches." Utilize what you know about your character (see how important character development is?), then write another scene that takes place later. Try to use the first scene to inform how your character behaves. Has your character changed? They should!

People evolve over time. They change when put in challenging situations, and that change is often very real and very permanent. This is the power of storytelling: experiencing other worlds with characters who feel like real people. ■

Ken Brosky is a professor of creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He's been published in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, The Portland Review, and Mystery Weekly. To get notified every time this blog is updated, [join the Pure Fiction substack!](#)



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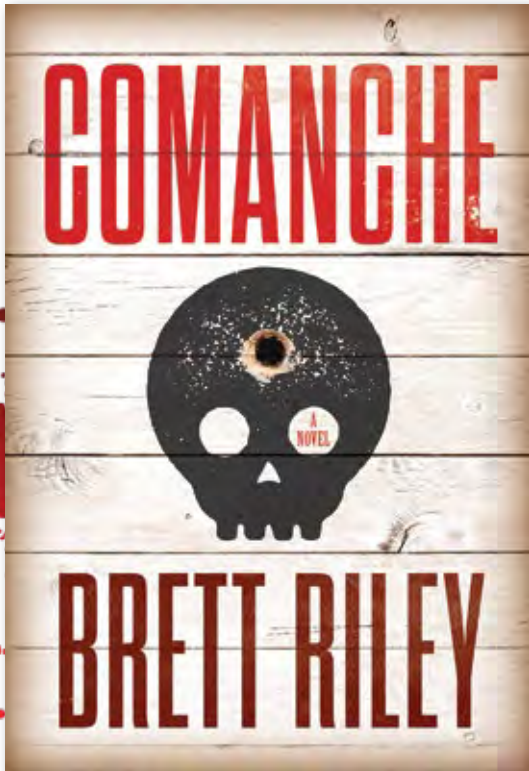
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COMANCHE:

A Novel

By Brett Riley



CHAPTER 1

P.D. walked out of the depot and turned left.

Someone stood in front of the dead house.

He dropped the tequila and the keys. The bottle hit the platform and rolled to the edge, where it teetered, the liquor gurgling out. P.D. ran and grabbed the bottle, saving about half the alcohol, and celebrated by taking another long gulp, Sutcliffe be damned. The liquor burned going down.

When he turned back to the dead house, the figure was gone.

P.D. tittered. *You damn fool. Nearly jumpin outta your skin thataway. Probably just some cowboy from the Half Dollar with a head full of Johnstone's tale and a bladder full of hot piss. Walked right by the outhouses in the dark, like folks sometimes do.*

Go piss in the privy like civilized folks! P.D. shouted.

Lanterns hung from iron hooks on either side of the depot's doors.

He retrieved the keys and took one of the lanterns and held it high, swinging it back and forth. No further sign of the visitor. P.D. started across the lot.

Upon reaching the dead house, he unlocked the door and pulled it open. Sure enough, the place smelled—dank, like old leaves and damp earth, with undertones of meat gone bad. Grimacing, he pulled his shirt over his nose and found the block of wood the depot workers kept for propping open the door. After setting the block in place and putting the lantern on the floor, P.D. went inside and pulled back the curtains—dark ones made of some thick, rough-spun cloth that kept people from seeing the coffins the workers lay on the floor or, when too many people dropped dead, stacked on top of each other like packing crates—and opened the windows. Walking back outside, he let his shirt drop and breathed in fresh air. He hoped the stink would clear out by morning.

When he thought he could stand it again, he went in. The floor looked terrible. Once raw and unpainted but sanded smooth, the center of it now bore evidence of those hatchets and that hacksaw, small chunks gouged from the wood here and there, the marks of serrated teeth having dragged across the boards, as if demented children had broken in with their fathers' tools and vandalized the place.

Well, I ain't no goddam carpenter. I just hope a stray dog or a wolf don't wander in and shit everywhere.

Against the far wall sat a pair of sprung, dusty boots with an empty gun belt coiled around them. They were covered in dark stains—water damage or dried blood or Lord only knew what. Next to them, a pile of clothes—filthy denim jeans, a pair of rancid socks, a wadded-up cotton shirt shot full of holes and stiff and stained dark, the frayed remains of a leather vest, a weather-beaten cowboy hat.

Hellfire, P.D. said.

He walked to the discarded clothes and picked everything up, struggling to keep hold of the lantern. He kept dropping items—a boot, the crusty shirt—and picking them up again until, cursing, he set the boots and gun belt on one of the supply shelves built onto the back wall. Just his luck, this shit would take more than one trip. On the way back, he would probably trip over a skunk and land on a cactus.

Carrying his burdens, P.D. wondered how to dispose of the clothes. Burn them? Bury them? Throw them in the street? Go down to the Half Dollar, and tell people they probably belonged to the Piney Woods Kid, and see who would buy him a drink for his story?

He walked outside.

The Piney Woods Kid stood ten feet away, between him and the depot, staring with gray and vacant eyes.

P.D. stumbled backward and swore.

The Kid could not be here. McCorkle had killed the shit out of him. The town—hell, half of Texas—had scorned and laughed at and dismissed the Kid, all those outlaw exploits already corrupted in people's memories as little more than the sting of a particularly loathsome horsefly. Yet there the man stood, covered in dried muck that might have been mud or might have been blood. He wore the same clothes P.D. carried. An impossibility, but even beyond that, something seemed off. The Kid looked *bleached*, like a garment rotting in the desert sun. Stringy, oily hair framed his pallid face. His arms hung slack, his guns holstered.

Calm down. This ain't the fella to spook.

P.D. tried to spit, but his mouth had gone dry.

The Kid stood silent, staring.

McCorkle must have killed the wrong man and claimed it was the Kid. No wonder the posse drove P.D. away from the dead house that night. How had the deputy managed to fool everybody at the Half Dollar? Somebody should have noticed. Maybe Johnstone's mania scared them all shitless.

Damn McCorkle and Johnstone. Damn my luck.

Still, P.D. Thornapple did not intend to stand out here all night with some murderous asshole who was supposed to be worm food. Jesus God, Kid, you scared the shit outta me, he said, his laugh rising in pitch until it disappeared. You better get on before old Noseless sees you.

Actually, if McCorkle had come along, that would have been just fine. Whatever got P.D. away from this maniac and back to his nice, safe cot. But you had to handle these gunfighter types a certain way, mainly by kissing their asses until they left.

The Kid said nothing. His eyes were the color of clouds on a moonless night.

In town, someone fired two shots in the air and whooped. P.D. jumped.

The Kid did not move.

Tiny slivers of spit and phlegm stuck in P.D.'s throat. He wiped his sleeve across his forehead, its fabric coarse on his damp skin.

Word has it you're killed, he said, but I guess Johnstone's tellin' tall tales. That sumbitch always had a mouth on him.

Maybe an unkind word about the local law would afford P.D. some favor. The Kid had been standing there a full minute, maybe two, and had not even blinked.

That was some damn good shootin' here, that day you took McCorkle's nose. Them laws thought they had you, but you blasted right through 'em. Never seen nothin' like it. The Kid stared. He might have been someone's displaced scarecrow.

P.D. shivered, even as sweat dripped down his forehead and coated his back.

Say somethin', he whispered. Don't just stare at me thataway. Talk to me. Please.

The Kid seemed not to have heard.

Someone fired another shot near the main thoroughfare. Then they whooped again. Who was it, and what were they up to? If only P.D. were there, or anywhere else. The middle of the ocean would have been fine. The Kid had always been a motormouthed lunatic but seemed even worse now that he had turned mute. If only somebody, anybody, would come along. They could piss, shit, vomit, or squirt all over the depot floor for all P.D. cared.

But no one came.

When P.D. looked back, the Kid stood two inches away. And his eyes were the gray, empty sockets of a skull. ■

Brett Riley is a professor of English at the College of Southern Nevada. He grew up in southeastern Arkansas and earned his Ph.D. in contemporary American fiction and film at Louisiana State University. A published author of short fiction, Riley has also won numerous awards for screenwriting. He lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. "Comanche" is his debut novel.

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Lisa Balamaro is an ambitious arts lawyer with a secret crush on her most intriguing client: former rodeo rider and reformed art forger, Tuck Mercer. In his newfound role as an expert in Old West artifacts, Tuck gains possession of the supposedly destroyed correspondence between Doc Holliday and his cousin and childhood sweetheart, Mattie—who would become Sister Mary Melanie of the Sisters of Mercy.

Given the unlikelihood the letters can ever be fully authenticated, Tuck retains Lisa on behalf of the letters' owner, Rayella Vargas, to sell them on the black market. But the buyer Tuck finds, a duplicitous judge from the Tombstone area, has other, far more menacing ideas.

As Lisa works feverishly to make things right, Rayella secretly enlists her ex-marine boyfriend in a daring scheme of her own.

When the judge learns he's been blindsided, he rallies a cadre of armed men for a deadly standoff reminiscent of the moment in history that made Doc famous: The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.

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