

Suspense, Mystery, Horror and Thriller Fiction

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 2016

*Anthony Franze Talks
Writing With*

JEFF ABBOTT

Craft Corner With

**VINCENT ZANDRI &
DARYNDA JONES**

Sneak Peeks From

**GLEN ERIK HAMILTON
L.J. SELLERS &
NEAL GRIFFIN**

Inside the Minds of

**D.P. LYLE
PETER STRAUB
TILLY BAGSHAW
BEV VINCENT**



**“AN URBAN THRILLER AS MODERN AS
TOMORROW’S *NEW YORK TIMES* WITH
A MAIN CHARACTER TO DIE FOR.”**

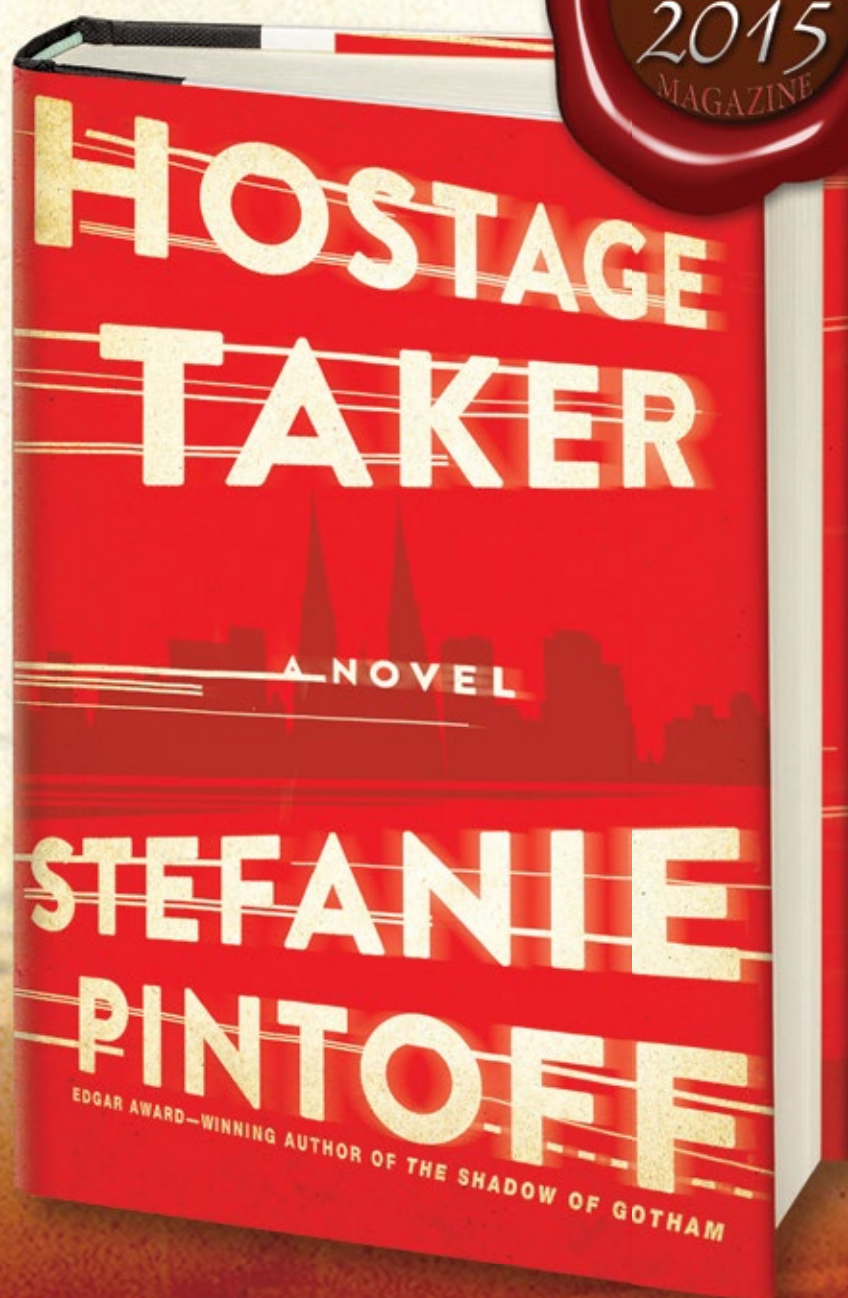
—LEE CHILD



**“A high-velocity roller
coaster of a thriller!”
—JEFFERY DEAVER**

**“Pintoff skillfully ratchets
up the tension and throws
more than one curveball into
this twisty, exciting read.”**

**—BOOKLIST
(STARRED REVIEW)**



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Every year I start the New Year with a letter from the editor talking about my predictions for publishing. However, the publishing game has surprised me so much that I've decided to simply say that, yes, we will have changes and, no, I can't even begin to forecast them. Instead, let's have some fun with this New Year letter.

I've never been a New Year's resolution person, thinking that the year would last longer than one month, which is how long

those resolutions seem to stick. Here at the magazine we don't set goals for the year, we like to simply do what we do and see where it takes us. In many ways we are an author creating a story—we have an idea of how to start it, but are surprised by how it ends. Those are the stories that I love to read.

There are some genres out there that I simply just can't get excited over. Every year the publishing game seems to saturate the market with the same kind of books, you know what I mean. Five years ago it seemed everything was vampire based, then after that we had zombies, then we hit the post-apocalyptic stage. Now it seems that we are in the middle of the terrorist era. It makes me wonder if the terrorists will continue to dominate this year or if something else will knock it off the top perch?

I believe it's impossible to predict what will be the next "big thing," so this is the warning I will give to authors. If you are a new author looking for a book idea and you're checking out what is selling right now, you are already too late. Many of the books that will be published in 2016 have already been purchased and are in the queue to be released. Publishers are looking for books to sell in 2017, and probably won't be purchasing a lot of the subject matter that was so popular in 2015. Trend chasing can be a very dangerous thing. You will always be behind the trend and wonder why your book doesn't sell.

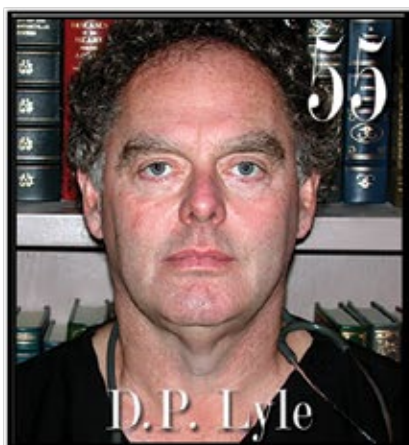
There is hope for you however and the answer is, stop looking at what is selling and simply write what is in your heart. If you put yourself emotionally into your writing, it will show and be successful. You can't guess what the future holds; I mean, did anybody *really* see the yoga pants phenomenon? If you are a clothing designer and thinking of bringing out yoga pants, you probably won't be that successful because the market is saturated.

Writing is no different. Chasing a trend will do one thing: You'll write several books in several different styles only to continue to push you further behind what you really should be writing—your passion. Listen to that little voice in your head telling you the story, don't fight it and don't think you're crazy, we all have little voices. In fact, my little voice is telling me to stop this letter and binge watch Netflix, so that's exactly what I'll do. Enjoy the issue.

John Raab
CEO/Publisher
Suspense Magazine ■



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FROM ACROSS THE POND

With Douglas Skelton

By Chris Simms

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I'm delighted to bring readers of *Suspense Magazine* a feature from the Crime Readers' Association. In it, an author from over here writes about crime fiction from a UK perspective.

GLASGOW—THE HARD CITY WITH A FIERCE HEART

One of the questions I'm often asked about my crime fiction is, why Glasgow? It's such a well-used backdrop for the genre, surely you could write about somewhere else?

Of course I could—but I'm a Glaswegian, it's where I know and, anyway, it's just a backdrop. The stories I tell could really be set anywhere.

William McIlvanney, of course, kicked it all off. Although there had been crime novels set in the city prior to that, "No Mean City" is the most notorious example and perhaps closest to what I'm doing.

Crime journalist Bill Knox produced a series of police procedurals from the late 1950s and, in the 70s, collaborated with scriptwriter Edward Boyd on the novelisation of the superb BBC-TV series, *The View from Daniel Pike*.

Hugh C. Rae, another former journo, also churned out a series of popular and readable thrillers—tartan noirs—before anyone even thought of the phrase. His first, "Skinner," was a fictionalised look at Peter Manuel, a Scottish serial killer of the 1950s.

They both used their knowledge of the city's criminal world to give their fiction an edge.

I like to think I'm doing the same.

I'm also a former journalist but the bulk of the inspiration for my writing comes from the years I was a precognition agent for Glasgow solicitors.

In Scotland, until comparatively recently, the prosecution was under no obligation to provide the defence with statements from either civilian or police witnesses. What they did provide was a list of witnesses they may or may not call to trial, so defence teams had to hire people to take what was called a precognition from those listed.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it? And it was. But it got worse—for those witnesses didn't need to talk to the likes of me. If they

did, they weren't obliged to tell the truth. They could tell me anything then go into court and say something completely different and there was not a thing the defence could do about it.

So I walked the mean streets of Glasgow, taking statements, pounding on doors, gathering evidence, because the men I worked for demanded more than merely following the footsteps of the prosecution, they had me finding witnesses for the defence.

I loved the job because it introduced me to all kinds of people—police officers, criminals, straight arrows, doctors, lawyers, pathologists. It taught me that not everything is clear cut, not everything is black and white—there are shades of grey. (Perhaps not 50 because that's a different genre altogether.)

I called on houses in the better parts of the city and the poorest. I once walked into a living room in a tenement flat so damp the family was sleeping in the living room on mattresses. The only thing keeping the walls together was what was left of the wallpaper.

In another house, a hallway was spotted with dog dirt and I was greeted by the culprit, a huge German Shepherd which could have eaten my arm off. Throughout the interview it sat right in front of me and stared. That's all it did. Stared. But it was enough. I still feel I was lucky to get out with all my appendages intact.

In yet another, I wondered why there were no interior doors. I soon learned why when I was shown into the living room where a three-seater settee was almost completely filled by a man so large he could've taken Pluto's place as a planet. It wasn't him I was there to talk to but he sat silently throughout the interview and barely moved. To be honest, I wasn't sure he could.

I was once asked to find a witness who was not on the prosecution list but who knew something about a serious assault. All I was given was his first name, that he drank in pubs around the city's east end and that he had a beard and a limp. It led me to bars where the conversation stopped when I walked in. If they'd had a piano player he'd've halted mid-tinkle and swivelled round to look at me.

I found him, but only because I spoke to a guy I knew with a dodgy past and he knew a fella who knew a fella who could ask another fella. Sometimes that was how it worked.

In one murder case with gangland connections I had cause to revisit a witness for some follow-up questions. He told me that just after my previous visit a couple of 'the boys' had been in, wanting to know what I'd asked. Turned out they were following me and speaking to other witnesses I'd interviewed.

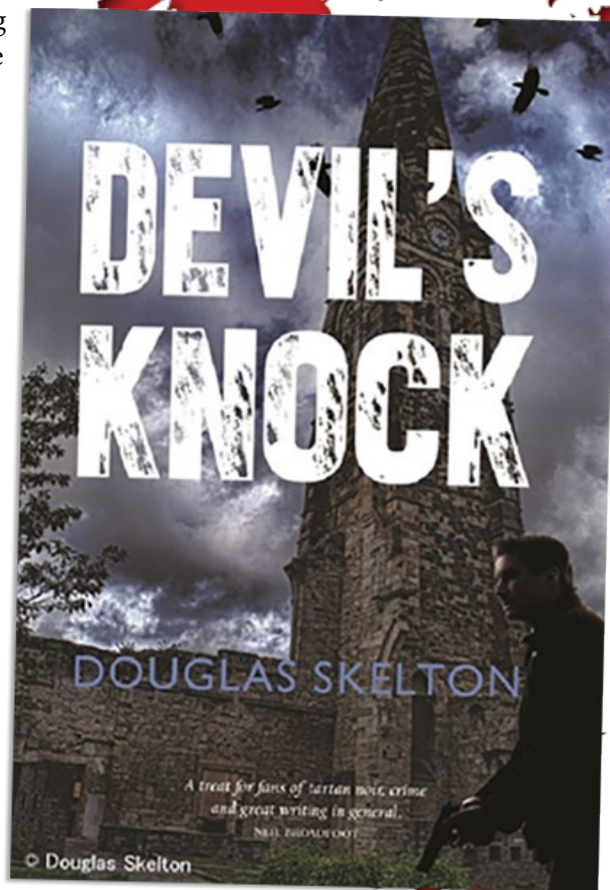
That had me looking over my shoulder, let me tell you.

Most people were friendly, a few were downright hostile, which was understandable given I was there for someone who may well have done them harm. However, it was not my job to defend the accused. I was there merely to find out what happened—or at least what might have happened.

It taught me a lot and I hope it rubs off on my fiction. I have good guys and bad guys but even they have layers. My anti-hero, Davie McCall, has his code but he's still a hard man, a crook. Even my police characters have shadows on their souls. Jimmy Knight, who in the course of the three books has gone from a Detective Constable to Detective Inspector, is arguably the biggest villain in the series. ■

Douglas Skelton began crime writing with true crime but moved into fiction with "Blood City" in 2013. Set in his home town of Glasgow, the series deals with a hard man with a heart, Davie McCall, and the changes in the city's underworld from 1980 to the new millennium. Discover more at www.douglasskelton.com.

Chris Simms is the editor of Case Files, the Crime Readers' Association's online magazine. Subscribe to it for free at www.thecra.co.uk. Along with nominations for the Crime Writer's Association Daggers (for his novels and short stories) and the Theakston's Crime Novel of the Year award, Chris was selected by Waterstone's as one of their '25 Authors For The Future'. He continues to feverishly scribble away in a small hut behind his house. Discover more at www.chrissimms.info.



A VOICE FROM THE FIELD

By Neal Griffin

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CHAPTER ONE

Gangsters call it the blade. The track. The *ho-stroll*. Back in the day it was called the red light district, but by whatever name, the area of downtown Milwaukee hadn't changed much in twenty-five years. Pimped out sleds loaded four deep with young men, brown or black but never both, still patrolled the dark streets with windows down, bass-heavy music thumping out a steady urban pulse. The latest generation of crack-whores wandered the streets or sat listless on the stoops of boarded up brick apartment buildings, waiting for men who sought bargain rates.

One young woman stood out from the rest as confident; even willing. Damn sure worth the money. She leaned against the shot out lamp-post, listening as the nearby Allen-Bradley clock tower chimed out the midnight hour, knowing the corner belonged to her.

A sleek late model Volvo pulled to the curb and stopped. The midnight blue metallic paint shimmered in the low light and the custom alloy wheels would pay her bills for a couple of months. *Nice ride*, she thought, shrugging herself off the lamp-post, stepping to the edge of the curb. A skin tight skirt and tighter tee-shirt hugged her slight but chiseled body, leaving little to the imagination. Thick black hair seductively framed her eyes and mouth and curled down her back, stopping just above the silver chain belt wrapped around her slender waist. The night air was heavy with humidity and even at this hour a thin layer of sticky sweat coated her deep brown skin.

She caught the driver's eye through the windshield and her instincts kicked in. Thirty something white-boy with a hundred dollar haircut, manicured hands poised on the steering wheel and a smug expression of confident superiority stuck on his face. She flashed a grin and sauntered closer, clicking four long, acrylic nails against the window. The driver touched his finger to the center console and the dark tinted glass lowered without a sound. Leather scent mixed with

cologne floated out in a blast of cool re-circulated air. She leaned in and gave him her best *come fuck me* look.

"Lookin' for a date, boss?" She communicated the essentials in a thick accent that said she wasn't long removed from south of the border.

His hard look moved across her body and the set of his jaw told her he was out to satisfy a desire a typical wife would not abide. "Maybe. You a cop?"

"Shiiiiit....Hell, no. Just lookin' to hook up." She let her eyes drift down, then back up. Her tone was meant to tease. "Party a bit."

The driver leaned over and opened the passenger door. "Okay get in, but hurry up. I want to get out of here."

She stood up straight. "Do you one better, boss. Room twenty-two. Meet me in the parking lot. We'll walk up together. You got a fine ride and all, but come on now..." Her fingers glided down her stomach and past her thigh. "How bout we get comfortable?"

She turned toward the motel half a block away. Its neon sign flashed a room rate of thirty dollars for three hours. The car door slammed shut behind her and she cast a glance back over her shoulder, catching the man's wry smile. "No thanks. Have a nice evening, officer."

"Eat shit, asshole!" She stepped off the curb and thrust her middle finger high in the air as the car sped away. A familiar voice came through her earpiece, laced with just a hint of impatience.

"Come on, Suarez. Get nasty with these guys. Try flashing a little up top."



Maybe that would help, Detective Tia Suarez thought, shaking her head. It had been a while since she'd been out on a vice detail and there was no denying that she was a little uptight. She gave a nervous laugh. The put-on accent vanished as she responded, doing her best to keep the tremor out of her voice, "Yeah, Sarge? Well, if I did, it'd be the closest you ever got to second base."

"I never stop at second. Always head straight for home." The corner of Tia's mouth quirked up at this reply from her assigned cover officer and boss, Sergeant Travis "TJ" Jackson. He was monitoring Tia's position from the alley across the street, inside a box truck marked "Leno's Panaderia." The two cops were assisting in a regional vice operation, on loan to Milwaukee PD from nearby Newberg.

Tia stood where she was sure the pole cam would have a good view and threw out her arms in invitation. "Well, feel free to come on out here. Just because the rules say U/C's can't get in the car, don't mean a stud like you couldn't close the deal, right?"

TJ's voice took on a challenging tone. "I don't know, Suarez. That gal Shelia from Milwaukee PD, she didn't have any problems working the corner. She bagged three. Maybe we ought to put her back out."

"Bullshit." There was no way Tia was getting shut out, not to mention shown up by a rookie MPD cop working her first undercover detail. "Just keep your eye on the screen and tell the Milwaukee PD boys to be ready to roll in."

Tia's reputation was not only that of a first rate Detective, but a talented undercover operative who could slip into the role of 'wet hooker' pretty quick. The average john figured she'd just recently crossed the border and never suspected she might be a cop. But tonight the fish just weren't biting. Or was it something else? After all she had been through, Tia couldn't help but wonder. *Is it me? Is it too soon?* Again the buzz in her ear.

"All right, but remember. You're representing Newberg PD." His voice was firm and Tia knew the chiding was only partially lighthearted. "Gotta show these city cops we can hang with the big boys."

She made sure she sounded unconcerned. "You know, maybe you should come out here, Jackson. I'm starting to think you'd make a better queen-whore than I do a straight up hooker."

"Bullshit, girl. You make a great hooker. Hell, if I was driving by I'd be all over your tight little—"

In mid-sentence, TJ went from somewhere beyond flirtatious to dead serious. "Okay. Get in character. You got one slowing down. He's looking at you from the parking lot on your six."

Tia picked up on the tension as well as the excitement in his voice. "He drove off camera but he's back there somewhere."

She turned and saw a man standing just outside an idling panel van, giving her a hard look. She set her hands on her hips, putting out the attitude of a working girl who was all business. Looking her up and down, the man kept his distance. Tia sauntered half a dozen steps toward him and the earpiece crackled. TJ's voice was no nonsense. "Okay, I got no visual on him and you're right at the edge of the window. Bring him to you, Tia."

The john took a few steps in her direction and Tia looked him over, glad she wouldn't have to actually touch the guy. Bald and pasty white, he was wearing a sweat-soaked flannel shirt with cut off sleeves. Tia guessed he was way north of three hundred pounds. His thick red beard could use a good combing. He didn't strike her as a guy who showered with any frequency and just the thought of physical contact caused a shudder of revulsion that was hard to hide.

He stopped and called out, "Slide on over here, girlie. Let me talk to you."

Tia walked forward a few paces but kept her distance. With her fake accent back in place, she put out the standard bullshit line that would tell anyone listening she had made contact with a john and was trying to reel him in. "What up, big man? You lookin' for a date?"

The voice in her ear was edged with frustration. "You've gone off screen, Suarez. Move back into the op area."

The john closed in. "More than a date, honey. You work for somebody or you out here on your own?"

Tia ignored TJ's warning and edged closer to her intended target, making sure she maintained the attitude of a girl ready to get on her back. "I don't peddle this ass for nobody. Now, you wanna get with me or not?"

Her ear buzzed with an angry whisper. "Damn it, Suarez. Get back on camera, *now*."

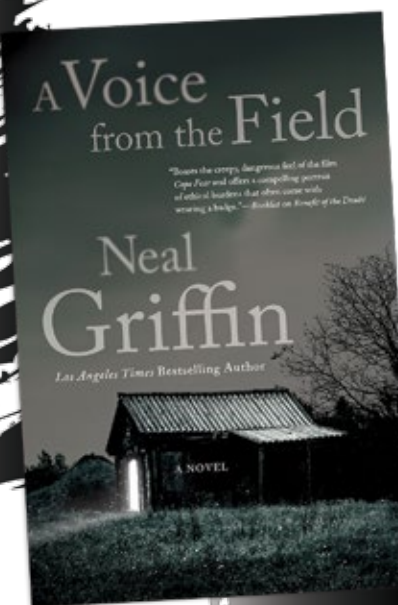
She knew she'd hear about this later, but she also knew TJ wanted the score as much as she did. After a pause, he continued, this time addressing the rest of the team. "Okay guys, stand by. Suarez is working the john. I've got no visual but good audio. Sounds like he took the bait."

The big man walked toward her, taking a hard look around the parking lot. He didn't show the typical apprehension of a john, more the menacing disposition of a seasoned crook. Tia decided she was out far enough—she'd reel him in from here or cut him loose. He stopped about five feet in front of her. The heavy odor of his perspiration wafted through the air and his gaze darted over her body, sizing her up.

"Where you come from, darlin'? You just get in from Mexico or further south than that?"

"Just tell me what you want, boss man. You're lookin' for something special I think."

Without taking his eyes off her, he flashed a yellowed grin, raised one arm above his head, and waggled his fingers. Tia heard the van drop into gear and looked up to see it driving forward. The van stopped just behind the john and the driver, a skinny, pale-faced loser with a scraggly ponytail, stepped out. The deep red speed bumps of a hardcore tweak coated his face. *Forget this. Game over.*



"No go, man. I'm not doing two guys." She ran both hands through her wig to signal distress, then remembered she was a good ten feet off camera. She managed one step toward the safety zone but that was as far as she got.

One vise-like hand circled the back of her neck and another clamped down over her mouth. Meaty fingers pinched off her nostrils and the sudden lack of oxygen filled her with a drowning panic. The big man pulled her by the head, nearly lifting her off the ground, pushing and dragging her toward the van. Her four inch stilettos put her at a distinct disadvantage and he was able to get her within two feet of the vehicle despite her struggles. His partner flung the side door open and stood by, wearing a shit-eating grin that made Tia wonder exactly what they had planned. The fat man spoke up. "In you go, girlie."

Another shove and Tia stumbled toward the open door that now looked like a gaping mouth ready to swallow her whole. Yellow light from the streetlamps framed a shadowed image inside the vehicle. A face. A young girl. Dark brown skin. Brown eyes. A six inch piece of heavy cloth duct tape covered her mouth from cheek to cheek. Long wisps of gray thread hung off each end, rising and falling in rhythm with her rapid breathing. Tia got her wits about her and pushed back, pulling hard at the hand across her mouth.

The john tightened his grip around her neck and called out to his partner, "Get over here. This bitch is strong."

Her wig slid down the side of her head and the ear piece dangled loose around her neck. Tia did her best to scream. TJ's frantic voice could be heard by everyone.

"Officer under assault. All units, code three response. *Move, move, move!*"

Engines and sirens fired to life, splitting the silence of the night. *Fifteen seconds*, she thought. *Twenty seconds, max. That's all I need.* Instinct took over.

Tia pulled her arm back and turned her body delivering a full strength elbow strike against her attacker's windpipe, sending him to his knees. She sucked in a desperate breath and turned her attention to the second man who came at her in a rush. She aimed a kick at his crotch and felt the stiletto heel pierce deep into the skin of his groin. He screamed in pain and joined his partner on the ground. The fat one clutched his throat, but managed to speak. "She's a cop. Let's get the hell out of here."

Staring into the van, Tia kicked off her shoes. Her plan was simple. Grab the girl, hunker down, and wait for the cavalry. But she couldn't see the captive anymore. She reached into the van, fumbling until, *there*. She grabbed hold of what felt like a foot. The skin was young but weathered and Tia could feel the years of work under the sun.

"Come to me, mija. Get out!"

Tia pulled until a massive weight knocked her to the asphalt. The fat man was on his feet, slamming the door shut. His partner, already back in the driver's seat, dropped the engine into gear. The would-be john staggered for the passenger door, as Tia pulled herself up off the ground. She spoke in perfect English, the accent gone. "Not so fast, fat boy."

She took three steps and launched herself onto his back,

landing as if he were a plow horse. She encircled his neck in the crook of her arm and clamped down with a perfect carotid restraint. He threw his body backwards, slamming her flush against the side of the van, but she maintained her hold. He called out in a weak voice, "God damn it, Jessup, get this bitch off me. Don't leave me here."

The tires chirped loud against the pavement as the van sped from the parking lot. Still riding his back, Tia watched the van turn a corner and the tail lights winked good bye. Her back up closed in, sirens wailing. She heard the final acceleration of sixteen cylinders and the scraping sound of the undercarriage against pavement as the cop cars sped into the parking lot from all directions, ignoring the marked exits and entrances. Red and blue light bathed the air.

She looked up to signal her exact location and in that moment of distraction, the suspect flipped her off his back. Tia landed hard and the big man dropped on top of her, all three hundred plus pounds pushing her flat against the asphalt still warm from the day's heat. His mouth was right up against her ear. "Out here playing cops and robbers, bitch? That's gonna cost ya."

The sound of opening car doors was followed by pounding boots. The first baton struck him near the head, barely missing Tia. More strikes began to rain down on his arms and legs and Tia was caught with a few glancing blows. "Watch out, guys. I'm right here." Tia's voice was now in command. "Get him off me and then you can beat his ass."

A Milwaukee PD officer who looked like he could play linebacker for the Packers rolled the suspect away from Tia and the tune up continued for considerably longer than necessary. TJ, who didn't have the luxury of lights, siren, and 310 horsepower, arrived last. He worked to establish control over the chaos. "All right, guys, that's enough. Get him cuffed."

Still a little breathless from the thirty second battle, Tia got to her feet. She grabbed Travis' patrol radio, her voice steadying as she spoke. "Dispatch, this is Newberg Unit David-14. One in custody. Second subject fled in a white panel van. No visible plate. Last seen westbound on Lincoln Avenue. Possible kidnapping victim in the rear of vehicle."

TJ took Tia by the shoulders and looked hard into her eyes. Tia saw the relief flood across his face but his tone seemed almost condescending when he said, "Calm down, Tia. We're here. Are you all right?"

Tia kept looking in the direction the van had gone. "There was a second guy. He took off. There was a girl in the back of that van. A teenager. Tied up and gagged. She... damn, Travis. We need to find her." ■

Neal Griffin is a 25-year veteran of law enforcement who grew up in the kind of town he writes about. Currently Criminal Investigations Division Commander in Escondido, California, he is a graduate of the FBI's National Academy training program. Griffin is a certified Master Instructor in law enforcement leadership and ethics. His first book, "Benefit of the Doubt," was a Los Angeles Times bestseller and his next novel, "A Voice From the Field," launches in February 2016. For more, visit www.NealGriffin.com.

Excerpt from "A Voice From the Field" by Neal Griffin (Forge, February 2016)

REVENGE

Is a Dish Best Served Cold

By S. Harrison

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Publicist



I love how a little phrase can hold so much meaning. I don't know about you, but every time I read it I always imagine the silhouette of a lonesome figure, stark black against the flickering embers of a burning farm house. The rusty shovel they used to bury their parents is clutched in their dirt-smeared hands, the corpse of a beloved family dog is lying shot at their feet and their narrowed, hate-filled eyes are staring into the night, as they whisper a solemn vow never to sleep again until every last one of the mysterious bandits who destroyed their world is dead. Retaliation, payback, vengeance, or my personal favourite—retribution—whatever you call it, if a story is a meal then revenge is a moreish spice that thriller and mystery writers love to spoon all over the pages, and I'm no exception. Why? Because the darker side of human nature somehow compels us to enjoy the very notion of it. Revenge is similar to hate, but the difference is that revenge has a sweet relish of righteous justification smeared on top that often makes it far too disturbingly easy to enjoy.

In my debut novel "Infinity Lost," the central character is a teenage girl with a mysterious past, super strength, military training and a vengeful mind. She's hell-bent on destroying the man who wronged her and is willing to tear down anything and anyone who stands in her way. But while we all love a kickass book where the baddies get what they deserve, the best stories always come from real life, and I thought I'd take this opportunity to share my personal favourite tales of revenge. Please keep in mind that these actually happened and just go to show that when it comes to making someone pay, no-one in human history has surpassed the lengths the next two angry people go to, to punish the ones who wronged them. I think I'll call the first sadistic snippet...

"Do Not Under Any Circumstances, Annoy a Homicidal Warlord."

In case you didn't know, Genghis Khan was the king of Mongolia a thousand years ago and he was a supreme killing machine. His armies killed so many people that the climate of the Earth changed. (I'm not kidding, look it up) But Genghis wasn't completely all about systematic genocide; he was a Business Khan too, so he sent five-hundred traders to the King of the neighbouring Khwarezmid Empire with this message: "I am master of the lands of the rising sun while you rule those of the setting sun. Let us conclude a firm treaty of friendship and peace."

Why you would want to anger a guy like Genghis Khan when he's trying to be nice is beyond me, but a man named Inalchuk did exactly that. Inalchuk was the governor of a city in the Khwarezmid Empire. When Genghis Khan's traders arrived in Inalchuk's city on the way to the emperor, he locked them all up, accused them of being spies, then he chopped their five hundred heads off and sent them gift wrapped back to G.K. as a big F.U. That was the biggest, worst and last mistake Inalchuk would ever make. A previously friendly, but now inconsolably furious Mr. Genghis, invaded stupid Inalchuk's lands with the full force of his murder hungry armies. No one knows for sure how many soldiers he sent, but estimates range from 200,000 to 800,000 heavily armed, catapult toting, elephant riding, country-conquering, cut your guts out for looking at them wrong, war hardened Mongolian killers. The Khwarezmid Empire was completely overrun, and when Inalchuk was captured,

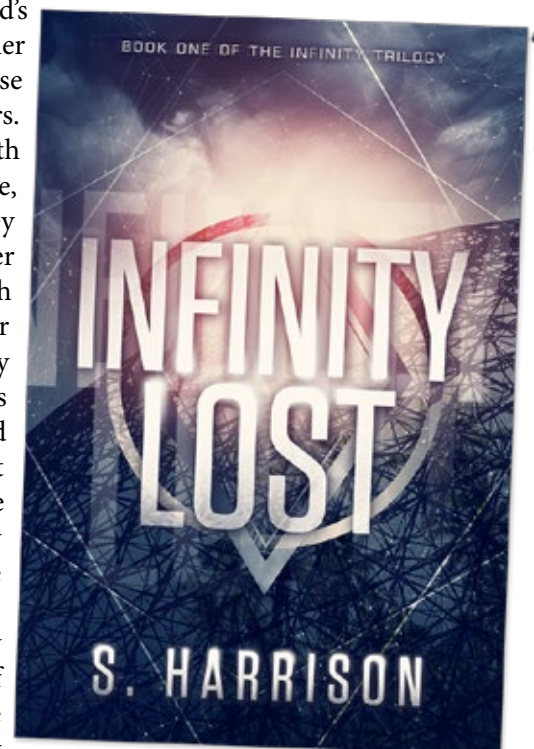
Genghis personally ended his life by pouring molten silver into his eyes and down his throat. But G. Khan wasn't done. Not by a long shot. He even went so far as to divert an entire river through the emperor's birthplace, completely erasing it from the planet in a raging torrent of retribution. If you learn only one thing from history about Genghis Khan let it be this: It was not a good idea to piss the man off.

Now, from Mr. "Don't Mess with Me" Khan, we go back in time to 10th century Kiev to a tale of revenge that is so chilling in its ruthlessness that it will make that one time your crazy ex keyed your car and kidnapped your cat look like a delightful and thoughtful birthday gift.

Medieval Russia. Lovely, beautiful Princess Olga was happily married to the handsome Prince Igor. By most accounts they seemed to be a reasonably nice royal couple living as idyllic a life one could live in plague and parasite-infested 10th century Ukraine. Sure, life wasn't Disney princess good but it was bearable, that is until the year 945 when everything went to hell in a handbasket. Prince Igor embarked on a journey to collect a tribute from the neighbouring Drevlians, and as neighbours so often seemed to do in the Dark Ages, they welcomed him in, threw him in a dungeon and then brutally murdered him. When the news reached Princess Olga she was understandably devastated. Her son and only surviving heir was only three years old and too young to take the throne, so Princess Olga stepped up as ruler of the Kingdom and immediately began plotting her calculated and vicious revenge. And what a revenge it was. I give you the true account of the incredible wrath unleashed from the brutally cunning mind of a furious young woman, a story I like to call...

"Hell Hath No Fury Like a Princess Scorned."

So, Princess Olga's beloved husband was dead at the hands of the Drevlians, and the raging anger she must have felt compelled her to devise a cruel, multi-layered plan of cold-blooded revenge unlike any other. Phase one: Now that he had murdered her love, the arrogant and power hungry Prince of Drevlians wished to marry Princess Olga so he could claim her Kingdom for himself. Expecting a meek and fearful woman, he sent twenty of his best men to convince her to accept his proposal, and when they arrived she warmly welcomed them in...then threw them in a giant hole and had every single one of them buried alive. Phase two: Princess Olga sent word to the Prince that she had accepted his proposal but required their most distinguished men to accompany her on the journey in order for her people to accept the offer of marriage. The Drevlians sent the best men who governed their land and when the men arrived, weary from travel, she offered them another warm welcome and an invitation to clean up in a bathhouse after their long journey. She waited until they were all soapy and soaking their saddle sores (try saying that five times quickly)...then she bolted and chained the doors to the bathhouse and set the whole thing on fire, burning them alive. Phase three: With the best and wisest men out of the way, Princess Olga now had her vindictive eyes set on destroying all the remaining noble Drevlians. She travelled to their Kingdom and invited the Drevlians to a funeral feast so she could mourn over her husband's grave. Olga's servants waited on the Drevlians and when they were drunk, her soldiers put sword and spear to over 5,000 of them. But she still wasn't done. Phase four: The Princess returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors. The peasant Drevlians begged for mercy and offered to pay for their freedom with honey and furs. She asked for three pigeons and three sparrows from each house, since she did not want to burden the villagers any further after the siege. They were happy to comply with such a reasonable request. Olga gave each soldier in her army a pigeon or a sparrow and ordered them to attach a thread to each bird and bind a piece of sulphur to each thread. When night fell, Olga had her soldiers release the pigeons and the sparrows and the homesick birds promptly flew back to their nests in Drevlia. The pigeons nestled in the rooves and rafters and coops, and the sparrows under the eaves of all the shops and stables and houses. The sulphur caught to the dry thatched rooves and ignited. There wasn't a single building that escaped the fire and it was impossible to extinguish the flames because all the houses caught light at the same time. The whole city was burned to the ground. All the surviving men, women and children were then killed or enslaved and Princess Olga finally felt avenged, albeit in a mind-bogglingly, brutal and over the top manner. Olga ruled both hers and her newly conquered pile of ashes and burned corpses until her death in 969. In honour of this accomplishment, the Church later made her a saint, probably because she looked angrily in their direction one time. I think I would have smiled nervously



and made her a saint, too. Side note: The movie of this would be amazing.

Modern day true tales of revenge aren't nearly as blood-thirsty, in fact, they can be downright musical. To rinse our minds of all that carnage and charred villagers I think I'll finish off our little foray into revenge with the charming account of one man, a guitar, and the airline that sorely wished they'd hired better baggage handlers. For your reading and listening pleasure I give you...

Dave Carroll, a Modern Day Genghis Khan (not really):

The incident which started the whole debacle occurred on March 31, 2008, when Dave Carroll's band was flying from Halifax to Omaha, Nebraska, on United Airlines. Airline baggage handlers are often referred to in the industry as "throwers," and throw is what they did to Dave's \$3,500 Taylor acoustic guitar. It wasn't just broken, it was snapped in two. After a year of lawfully wrangling for reparations, United Airlines basically told Dave to go jump off a short pier and don't bother them again. Dave fought back in the only way he knew how. He wrote a song and put it on YouTube. "United Breaks Guitars" chronicled the real-life experience of how his guitar was broken, and the stonewalling reaction from the airline. The song became an immediate YouTube hit upon its release in July 2009, and a devastating public relations humiliation for United Airlines. In the previous months Dave had given them every chance to just replace the guitar, but four days after the song's release, *The New York Times* reported that the United Airlines share price had plummeted due to public outrage costing its shareholders a sum total of, wait for it...one hundred and eighty million dollars. Damn. Dave Carroll now owns United Airlines and plays all of his concerts standing on top of a 747 wearing suits made of money. That last bit isn't true but the rest is, and here's the link to the song that satisfyingly brought a big, mean corporate entity to its humble, quivering knees. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>

I hope you've enjoyed this little visit to the endlessly interesting, sometimes scary, often disturbingly satisfying world of revenge. And remember; always be careful what you do, because one day the revenge just might be on you. ■

S. Harrison hails from sunny Gisborne, the eastern most city in New Zealand. After leaving high school he studied the performing arts and went on to feature in TV commercials, short films and plays. In the late nineties he co-founded a rock band, wrote and recorded an album, produced music videos and opened for a number of world-famous acts including, Incubus, Audioslave and Creed. After the band, he worked for New Zealand's largest radio network before travelling through Europe, marrying an amazing woman from England and finally sitting down to write the first in a trilogy of science-fiction novels. He loves science, green tea, cheeseburgers and movies—especially superhero and art house films. He frequently escapes to some of the many tropical islands of the beautiful South Pacific to focus on his writing, and the young adult sci-fi thriller "Infinity Lost" is his first novel. He currently resides in Auckland, New Zealand, with his wife Lucy.

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ALWAYS REMEMBER THE RULES

By D. Daniel Brian

RULE NUMBER ONE: stay cool.

He lived and died by that rule; of all the rules in existence, it was the one Primo Moretti considered the most significant. It's what separated life and death.

Primo squinted up at the bright sky; the sun blazed down on his olive skin. Autumn couldn't get here fast enough, he thought. He loathed the warm weather, but it was the humidity he despised the most.

He ran a hand through his dark hair as he entered the diner on 23rd at Livingston. It was empty, save for a few patrons tucked in a booth and an older man seated at the counter—a large corned beef sandwich resting in front of him.

The cool air from the vents felt good. He scanned the room and walked toward the back, an area typically reserved for social functions as well as private parties, and found the man he was searching for—alone at one of the tables sipping a cup of coffee.

The man brought the rim of the cup to his thin lips, peered over it, and said, "Have a seat."

Primo pulled the chair out and sat across from him. A heavy silence settled between them, the only sounds emanating from the area were several men laughing in the kitchen located in the rear.

"You got another job?" Primo asked.

"You want a coffee or something?"

Primo waved it off. "No thanks."

"The cheesecake is good," the man offered. "Or are you still watching your weight?"

"Maybe some other time."

The large man across from Primo shrugged his shoulders and took another sip of his beverage. He was broad-shouldered, his hair almost white, and had the bluest eyes Primo had ever witnessed.

"You look good."

"Thank you, Hector," Primo said.

"I mean it."

One of the servers changed a tablecloth in the far corner, out of listening range. Primo watched as Hector drummed his fingers on the table. He couldn't imagine sipping coffee on a day like this, where the temperatures were rumored to reach one hundred degrees. But even dressed in a crisp white shirt and dark blue tie, not a bead of sweat shone on Hector's

forehead.

Stay cool.

"How have you been?" Hector asked.

"Good, I guess."

Hector nodded.

Primo hated the small talk, but he knew that's how Hector was. He didn't like to cut right to the chase.

"When was your last job?" Hector said.

"Six weeks ago," Primo said.

"That's right." He took another sip and lifted the cup in the air, signaling for a refill.

"Money-wise you seem to be doing all right, I assume."

One of the servers appeared and topped off his cup.

"It's not too bad," Primo said.

"Then again, you really didn't have a use for a lot of money. What do you do with all you earn, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I send it home," he said, "to my family."

Hector leaned back in his chair. "Is that right? You're a good son."

"My parents are dead. I send it to my sister."

"In Greece?"

"Yeah."

"She's lucky to have a brother like you," Hector said.

"Can I have a glass of water?"

"Sure," he said and snapped his fingers.

A moment later a server placed a tall glass on the table.

Primo took a sip, the cold drink feeling good as it passed his lips. Primo set the glass down and looked at Hector. "I want out."

Hector stopped drumming his fingers. "You want out?"

"Yeah."

"Why, may I ask?"

"I just do. I'm tired. I want another kind of life. Maybe get married one day, have children."

Hector laughed. "Who's putting these ideas in your head, Primo? You...married with children? Think about what you're saying."

Primo felt angered by his response, but he held back his feelings.

"I have thought about it," he said. "It's what I want."

"Whom have you been talking to?"

"No one."

"This doesn't sound like the Primo I know."
 "It's how I feel now," he said.
 Hector grinned. "Is there a woman? Huh?"
 Primo shook his head. "There's no woman."
 Hector turned his head. Primo could almost see the cogs turning within his mind. He returned his focus on Primo.
 "What are you going to do? What kind of work will you be doing? You don't know anything else."
 "Maybe," he said. "I want to go back to Greece."
 "What kind of life will you have there? I pulled you out of there, remember?" Primo detected a tiny hint of resentment in his voice. "I brought you here and gave you an opportunity to make something of yourself."
 "And I did," Primo said. "Now, I've grown tired and want something different."
 Hector's hand slammed down on the table, rattling the coffee cup. "Something different? You want something different?"
 Primo glanced down. "Yes, a change."
 "How I wished you'd understand," he said.
 They sat in silence for what seemed like hours, but in reality was only a couple of minutes.
 Hector leaned forward again in the chair, his tie pressed against the edge of the table. "I've got one last job for you, then."
 Primo's pulse quickened. One last job? Perhaps he was coming to terms with Primo's decision.
 "What is it?"
 "It's different. Not the usual job, you see."
 "Is it local?"
 "Yes."
 Hector reached under the table and produced a manila folder. He slipped on a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket and opened the file.
 "It pays a considerable amount more."
 "Tell me," Primo said.
 Hector took a quick sip of the coffee and cleared his throat. "There's a child—"
 "Child?"
 Hector glanced up at him. "Yes."
 "That's the target?"
 "We don't ask questions, Primo."
 "The policy is no women or children," he said.
 "Don't you think I know the goddamn policy?"
 The words hung in the air like a foul stench.
 "A child, Hector?"
 "Listen to me, you fool. I don't like it any more than you do, but they must have their reasons. They've selected us for the job and I've selected you."
 Primo turned away. *A child?* It went against his beliefs. He couldn't harm a child.
 "No," he said.
 "They're doubling our usual take on this," Hector said.
 "I can't. Tell them no."
 Hector chuckled. "Tell them 'no'? Are you out of your fucking skull? You don't say no to these people, just as you don't say no to me."

A cold chill traveled down Primo's spine. "Are you threatening me, Hector?"
 "Listen and listen good: these aren't threats. All right? The job must get done."
 "I can't harm a child," Primo said.
 "Like I mentioned before, they have their reasons..."
 "What could a child have possibly done?" Primo asked.
 "We are not to ask questions. We do the job. We get paid. End of story."
End of story. If only it was that simple.
 "Here, I've made copies of the file." He slid it across the table. Primo peered down at it. "They want it done within a week."
A week?
 "Just think: you'll be done with this life and entering a new one in only seven days. Just like you wanted."
Just like I wanted? This is not what I wanted.

RULE NUMBER TWO: get to know your target well—learn everything you can about them. The more knowledge you possess, the better chance you have of succeeding in your mission.

Primo's studio apartment was located on the west side overlooking Central Park. It was tiny, but it fit him well. He pulled a Diet Pepsi from his refrigerator, and plopped down on the leather settee with the folder on his lap.

The target was an eight-year-old boy of Egyptian descent with dark, piercing eyes. The small black and white photograph was clipped to a series of papers that contained several layers of detailed information regarding the boy. Primo couldn't get his eyes off the photograph.

What could he have possibly done to deserve this? He thought, bringing the can to his lips. The boy appeared so innocent; a tiny smile played at the corner of his mouth.

An innocent child.

According to the dossier, the target was born Ahmed Khalil Mohammed in Cairo. His mother was a physician and his father worked as a diplomat. They were due to arrive in the City tomorrow. The boy had been privately tutored and was fluent in three languages. Primo gazed down at the boy's large eyes. What was it they said about children with big eyes? Something about intelligence?

They wanted the job done within a week. He would arrive tomorrow, landing at LaGuardia. The file stated they'd be checking into the Ritz; the boy's father was due to appear at the U.N. the following day. Primo was sure the family would be heavily protected, as most diplomats were when they traveled.

Primo closed the file and sighed, still having reservations about the job. Taking the life of a child was more than he bargained for. He didn't see a way out, aware of the ramifications if he didn't complete the task.

The phone rang.

Primo lifted the cordless receiver from the end table. "Hello."

"Primo?" It was his sister.

"Adriana?" He detected urgency in her voice.

"There are men here."

Men?

"What kind of men?" he asked.

"The kind that will instill great pain to your lovely sister if you don't go through with the job," said the grave voice on the other end of the line.

"Who is this?"

"That's not what's important right now," he said. "Adriana will be fine...as long as you do the right thing."

The line went dead.

Son of a bitch. They'd sent a couple of thugs to baby-sit Adriana, just to ensure he would go through with it.

He dialed Hector's number, who picked up after three rings.

"Did you send some men to my sister's place?"

"Did I what?" Hector sounded confused. "Send 'men'?"

"Yes. They are at my sister's house, in Greece, right now. You sent them to watch her."

"We shouldn't be speaking on the phone like this," Hector said. "It's not really smart."

"Did you?"

"Of course not, you idiot," he said. "What do you take me for?"

Silence. Primo waited, taking in his words, the vibration and tone of his voice. From what he could tell, he was telling the truth.

"Then it was them," Primo said.

"You now realize the seriousness of what lies before you," Hector said.

Primo hung up.

The men were professionals. He knew that as long as he fulfilled his end of the bargain, his sister would remain safe.

Primo sat parked behind the wheel of a leased Buick Lucerne, watching the boy and his family climb into a dark sedan with tinted windows. It then pulled away from the airport's curb.

Thirty minutes later they arrived at the Ritz. As the boy descended from the vehicle, he peered up at the buildings, taking in the beauty of his surroundings. He clutched his mother's hand as he followed his father's lead. They disappeared into the lobby. Primo glanced at his watch to see that it was two-thirty-five.

He leaned back in the seat and waited. They would settle in and make a few calls. Perhaps an hour or so later, they'd reappear for dinner, or to take in the sights of the City. He was a patient man and part of his job entailed him to do a lot of waiting. Under different circumstances, he didn't mind it, but these weren't the case. His thoughts drifted to his sister. He knew she was scared, but soon it'd be over. A life for a life. He couldn't let them harm his sister. She was all he had.

With his eyes almost closed, Primo was drifting off to sleep when a blaring horn startled him. He snapped his eyes open, sat up, and peered across the street. There was no sign of the boy or his parents. He rubbed his face and popped a mint into his mouth.

Soon, the boy's father slipped out of the hotel and the same dark sedan pulled up in front. The uniformed driver

got out, opened the rear passenger door for him and sped away, blending in with the rest of traffic.

Upstairs.

The boy was alone with his mother, with the exception of one or more security personnel. It was inevitable that they'd appear soon. Any woman left alone in the City would get the urge to go shopping. No one wanted to be cooped up in a hotel room for any extended period, no matter how swank it was. It was just a matter of time.

An hour and ten minutes later, there they stood, in front of the hotel, the doorman flagging a cab on their behalf. A large man dressed in a dark suit accompanied them. Primo turned the key, revved the engine and prepared to follow them.

They came to a stop at Tiffany's. The boy's hand was still wrapped around his mother's as they entered the store.

Primo wanted to do this quick and easy. He would take out the security guy, and then aim the gun on the child. The important thing was to get away fast, not allow for any opportunity to crop up where someone could play hero. With all the chaos, he imagined it would be difficult for anyone to positively ID him. At least, he hoped that was the case.

The moment that Primo thought about exiting his car, the boy, his mother and their bodyguard wandered out of Tiffany's, and back into the sedan that awaited them in front.

He followed them back to the hotel. Dammit! A lost opportunity. Why'd they return so quickly? Primo would just have to wait again.

Soon darkness would prevail, the glare of the sun subsiding as it slipped below the horizon. He'd been waiting almost four hours. From the glove box, he produced a small baggie that contained several crackers. He bit into one and washed it down with a warm diet cola.

The boy appeared outside. He held the hand of the bodyguard as they waited for the sedan to pull up. His mother must have remained behind. Primo wondered where they were off to.

He saw the bodyguard glance at his watch, a tiny cell phone glued to his ear. Primo started the ignition and waited.

The sedan pulled up to the curb and he watched the boy get into the backseat as the bodyguard took the seat up front. Moments later, Primo was tailing the sedan yet again. Primo noticed they were leaving the City and heading toward Long Island. Why were they going there? And why wasn't his mother with him?

The sedan stopped in front of a small home with weathered clapboards and a rusty chain link fence surrounding the property, the windows dark. After the driver opened the door for the frightened looking boy, he stepped out.

Primo cut the lights on the car. He was back far enough not to be detected, but close enough to see what was going on.

The bodyguard grabbed the boy by the neck and led him roughly toward the house. This came as a surprise to Primo. It seemed odd that the man supposedly paid to protect the family would behave in such a manner toward the child.

The sedan made a three point turn and came toward

Primo. He ducked until the vehicle passed.

Primo stepped out of the rental and walked slowly toward the house. It was situated behind several tall oak trees, partially obscuring it from view. A dog barked in the distance. He walked to the property next door and hopped the fence. Glancing up at the house, he saw his target inside. A single light appeared to be coming from the kitchen, but Primo couldn't tell. He approached the rear door and checked the knob, twisting to find it unlocked. Primo removed his WA Berretta Elite 1A with the red-dot laser and pushed the door open.

The back door led to the mudroom, where he could hear the man's voice nearby. Primo stood in the doorway between the mudroom and the kitchen, the bodyguard's back to him. He was barking orders at the child, shouting at him to take a seat while he called his father with his demands.

Demands?

The boy suddenly noticed Primo, his large eyes darting away from the man in front of him. At that moment in time, Primo knew that the bodyguard realized they weren't alone. He whipped around and brought his arm up, the gun blazing toward Primo as he slowly squeezed the trigger...

But Primo was too fast. The man took two quick shots to the chest; his body crumpled to the floor.

The boy shook with fear when Primo aimed the gun at him. "Are you alone?"

He nodded, his eyes two large, round ovals.

"Why were you brought here?"

The boy remained silent, his small frame shuddering.

"You can talk, can't you?"

He swallowed hard. "Kidnapping."

"Kidnapping?"

"Yes," he stammered.

"They were going to collect a ransom for you?"

"Yes."

"What about your mother?" Primo asked.

The boy looked down. Tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Is she dead?"

The boy nodded again.

Dammit! What the hell was going on?

"Come with me," Primo said.

The boy glanced up, his face a mask of confusion as Primo lowered his weapon.

"Let's go."

As Primo headed back into the City with the boy, he watched the kid stare vacantly out the passenger window, a million thoughts were probably racing through his mind. Primo couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him.

"You must be a very important young man," Primo said. "Your own bodyguard tries to ransom you off, and then *I* was hired to kill you."

The boy's head snapped in his direction. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Why would someone want you dead?"

The boy turned back to the window.

"Where did you get your manners from?"

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"I think you do know," Primo answered. "Your mother's dead now. Someone went to a lot of trouble to go to my sister's house in Greece, threatening to kill her if I didn't kill you. I want to know what's going on and you're going to tell me."

The boy began to cry again. Primo had to remember that he was dealing with a scared child who had just lost his mother.

"Please don't hurt me," the boy stuttered through his tears.

Primo didn't know how to respond. He remained silent for the duration of the trip. Fifteen minutes later, he glanced over at the boy and noticed that he'd fallen asleep.

RULE NUMBER THREE: *never get emotionally involved with the target.*

They went to Primo's apartment where he sat the boy down on the couch, giving him a glass of water. Primo plopped down across from him, with the gun resting on his lap.

"I need to know why you're a target," Primo said.

The boy wiped his lips with the back of his hand and placed the glass down on the end table.

"They'll eventually kill my father, too," he said.

"Who?"

"Men like you."

"Why?"

The boy sat back on the couch and looked away. Primo knew their conversation had ceased.

As Primo scanned the news for any word of the dead bodyguard's discovery, he noticed that the boy had once again gone to sleep on the couch. He listened to his rhythmic breathing; his chest moved slowly up and down. Primo fetched a blanket from the hall closet and draped it over him.

As the night sky boasted stars, Primo thought of Adriana and the men that were in her home, watching her, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. He loathed them and the people they worked for.

There was nothing glamorous about what he did. It was a job, paying the bills, and giving Primo the luxury of sending much-needed funds to his sister. It provided him pleasure to do so; she would have done the same for him.

He noticed the boy stirring in his sleep, his eyes fluttering. He said something, but it was incoherent, the words twisted. Never get emotionally involved with the target.

Never had a child for a target, he thought.

Primo and the boy arrived at Hector's diner a little before nine-thirty in the morning.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hector asked.

"What does it look like?" Primo said.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?!"

Primo led the boy toward the back of the diner and motioned for him to have a seat. He grabbed Hector by the elbow and drew him away from the kid, out of earshot.

"His mother's dead," Primo said.

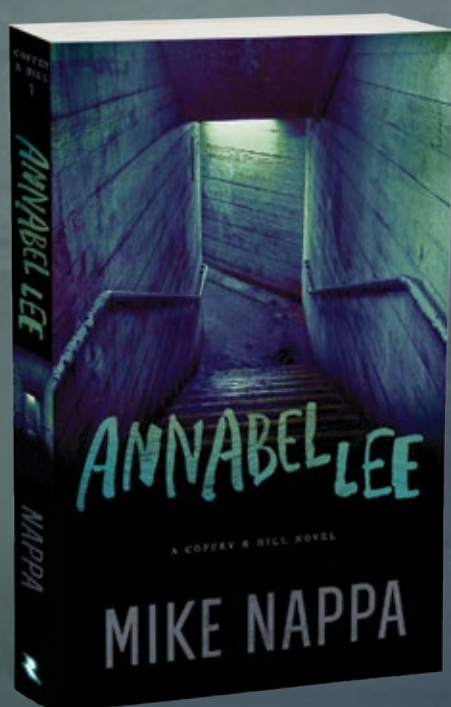
"So?"

"His bodyguard killed her, so I killed the bodyguard."
 "Your job was to kill the boy," Hector said.
 "What's going on? Why is this boy's death so valuable?"
 "I told you: we don't ask questions—"
 Primo produced his gun, the end of the barrel pressed against Hector's forehead. For the first time, Primo had the luxury of witnessing him sweat.
 "What are you going to do? Shoot me? Huh?"
 "If I have to," he said.
 "Please, don't make me laugh."
 "Tell me about the boy."
 "You're relentless," Hector said.
 The boy watched, frozen.
 Hector's cell phone rang four times before he said, "Maybe I should get that."
 "Slowly."
 Hector's hand went to his inner coat pocket and fished out the cell phone.
 "Hello." He waited a moment, glanced at Primo and held out the phone. "For you."
 Primo took it out of his hand. The barrel still remained concentrated on Hector's forehead.
 "We're watching your every move," the voice on the other end said. "Dispose of the target or I place a call to the men who have been quite smitten with your sister."
 "Fuck you," Primo said. "You touch my sister and you're dead. Mark my words."
 Click.
 He threw the phone across the room, shattering it to pieces.
 "You're a stupid man," Hector said. "You think these guys are playing around?"
 "If you don't tell me why they want this boy dead, I'm going to decorate this room with your brains."
 "What's it to you, Primo?" he said. "You do the job and move on. Both you and your sister live to tell the tale."
 He pressed the barrel further into Hector's flesh; a red indentation began to appear from the force.
 "Now."
 "What happens then...after I tell you? Are you going to finish the job so we can get paid?"
 "Is everything about money to you, Hector?"
 "Don't get sentimental on me," he said. "You're a killer. You've taken human life without thinking twice."
 "So what? This is different," Primo said.
This is a child for Christ's sake.
 Stay cool...always remember the rules.
Fuck the rules.
 Hector noticed something in Primo's eyes, something that seemed to have grown lifeless and still.
 "Wait!" Hector said and cleared his throat. He looked over at the child seated on the edge of the chair, tears streaming down his face.
 "Tell me," Primo urged.
 "The boy is not what you think."
 "What?"
 "He is on a mission himself, aren't you?"

The boy looked up.
 "What're you talking about?" Primo asked.
 "Why don't you tell him?" Hector aimed his question at the child.
 "Tell me what," Primo said.
 "Tell him what you are."
 "I want to see my father," the boy said.
 "Never," Hector roared.
 Primo grabbed a fistful of Hector's hair and yanked his head back. "You better tell me now. I'm losing my patience."
 "The boy is a terrorist," Hector said.
 He let the words sink in, gauging Primo's reaction.
 Primo backed away from him. "I don't understand."
 "What's not to understand," Hector said. "His father has groomed him, isn't that right?"
 "Leave me alone," the boy said.
 "That's right," Hector said. "Today at the U.N. he would have strapped on a bomb powerful enough to take out the Israeli Prime Minister and other members of his cabinet. Who would have suspected a young boy like him?"
 Primo looked at the angelic face of the child. Could Hector be telling the truth, or was this some sort of trick?
 "Now you know," he said. "If you don't kill him, they will certainly kill your sister and come after you."
Son of a bitch, he thought as his mind raced. *Think, think, think!*
 "So the bodyguard hadn't kidnapped you," Primo said.
 "He was trying to stop you."
 A tiny smile flickered at the corner of the boy's mouth.
 "He was a Mossad agent, of that I am sure."
 Primo continued, "And you killed your own mother."
 "It was part of the plan as per my father's orders. She was for the peace accord. She went against everything we've lived and died for."
 Primo was stunned. His entire body was numb and the gun in his hand felt like it weighed a thousand pounds.
 He raised the pistol at the boy.
 "I'm not scared," the child said, standing up, back straight, chin high. "I will be with Allah. There are many more behind me waiting for their moment of glory."
 Primo closed his eyes and thought how wonderful it would be to see his sister again. ■
D. Daniel Brian is the author of several non-fiction {true crime} books, including "Henry," a book {adapted to film script} based on the exploits of Henry Lee Lucas, one of the most vicious serial killers in American history.
He has also interviewed many celebrities within the independent film industry, as well as many authors within the Christian fiction and non-fiction genres and many true crime writers, including James Elroy, John Gilmore, Stephen Singular, Christopher Berry Dee, and former FBI undercover agent Bob Hamer.
He lives in Southern Indiana where he is now semi-retired, and spends his spare time writing, reading, and investigating more mysteries.

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New York Times bestselling author



On a farm fourteen miles east of Peachtree, Alabama, a secret is hidden—a secret named Annabel Lee. Her uncle's last words before he hid her away: *Don't open that door for anybody, you got it? Not even me.*

"ANNABEL LEE IS COMPELLING, FAST-PACED,
AND FILLED WITH
FASCINATING CHARACTERS."

— M. K. PRESTON,
Mary Higgins Clark Award-winning novelist, *Song of the Bones*

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POINT OF CONTROL



By L.J. Sellers

Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author

Chapter 1

Friday, March 13, 8:05 p.m., San Jose, California

Nick Bowman had never felt more alive. He'd just had the best sex of his life with a spectacular younger woman who expected nothing from him, and his research had hit a breakthrough that had just earned him an exciting job offer. Plus, he'd finally won the International Metallurgy Award. Nearly euphoric, he strode down the hall of the hotel, eager to climb into his new Jaguar XE, rev the engine, and fully enjoy the moment. Soon enough, he would be home, boxed in by a wife who didn't appreciate him and two surly kids who didn't seem to have his DNA.

As he stepped into the elevator, Nick shoved aside the negative thoughts and replayed his session with Carly, a long-legged model he'd met at the gym. She was incredible—sexy, smart, and independent. She'd waved him off after their second round of sex, telling him to move along so she could shower and have the room to herself for a while. Carly understood that he had to get home to his family before it seemed suspicious, even for a late night at work.

In the basement parking garage, warm, muggy air engulfed him, and he pulled off his sports jacket. Out in the night air, with the Jag purring under him, the air would be fantastic. He loved living in central California—so much more civilized than the dull Iowa landscape and cold winters he'd grown up with. Nick hurried toward his car, whistling softly. He only had twenty-four hours to consider the job offer, and he didn't know if he would take it, but the money was exciting to think about. He was already doing quite well. A lucky, lucky man.

A sudden movement startled him. He spun toward the big concrete post he'd just passed, and a man in dark clothes rushed toward him. No, two men, one behind the other, and both wearing ski masks. The lead guy's arms jerked up, holding something dark. Before Nick could cry out or swing his fists, a heavy cloth bag came down over his head, and the man spun him around. Powerful hands grabbed his wrists from behind and pulled them together. *What the hell?* Fear shot from his belly into his throat. "Hey! Stop! You've got the wrong guy!" His words sounded garbled inside the cloth.

A hand clamped the bag against his open mouth. "Quiet! We don't want to hurt you."

Nick didn't believe him. Heart racing, he prayed for the first time since he was a kid.

Chapter 2

Sunday, March 15, 7:20 p.m., Washington, DC

Zach Dimizaro stepped out of the bar and tried to shake off the jitters. Head



down against the wind, he hurried toward the nearby park, wishing he hadn't downed two beers on an empty stomach. But this meeting made him nervous, and he needed the alcohol for courage. The buyer had insisted on a late-night transfer in a part of town he normally didn't go to, especially after dark. All of it made him uncomfortable. Except the money he was about to put in his pocket. The first step toward forming his own start-up company, making the lifestyle apps he was really interested in.

The crisp night air penetrated his coat, and he pulled it tighter. Zach picked up his pace, anxious to get the deal over with. He passed two dark storefronts and another bar. Across the street he could see the seedy park, where a cluster of dark figures hung out on the corner. *Gangbangers?* Heavy footsteps snapped his attention toward the alley beside him. A big man walked toward him with a gun aimed right at his chest. *Oh god, a mugger!* Zach couldn't take his eyes off the silver weapon gleaming in the moonlight.

"Get into the alley. Now!" The mugger's voice was low pitched and menacing, even through the scarf covering the bottom of his face.

Run! But he couldn't. His body was too heavy, too out of practice. Why had he let himself get like this?

The man stepped out of the alley, grabbed his elbow, and threw him up against a brick wall. "Give me everything in your pockets!"

Shit! His iPhone was practically new. He'd been lucky to get it before the production slowdown and shortage. Now cell phone resale value had shot so high, everyone was a target for thieves. That's what this guy wanted.

Why the hell was he worrying about his damn iPhone? It was the prototype phone and the microchip he needed to focus on. They both had the algorithm. How to distract the mugger from them?

"I've only got about forty dollars, but you can have it." Zach pulled his wallet from his back pocket and opened it. The microchip was inside, and as he fumbled with the bills he managed to slip it out and palm it.

"Hand me the whole thing!" The man with the gun reached for it, and the scarf slipped off his chin. Brown skin, wide nose, long black coat, wool cap. That's all the detail Zach could process in the dark—while scared shitless and a little drunk.

Zach clenched his jaw and handed him the wallet, keeping the chip wedged between two fingers.

"Phones too. And whatever else you've got on you."

Shit! Shit! Shit! Phones, plural. Why would the bastard assume he had more than one? The device prototype he was carrying was worth fifty thousand, and the man he was supposed to meet had a satchel of cash waiting for him. The damn mugger wouldn't even know what he'd taken. "I've got an iPhone," Zach said quickly. "That's it." He slipped the cell from his jacket and held it out.

The mugger snatched it and shoved it into his own coat.

In the brief second that the big man glanced down, Zach slipped the microchip into his mouth. A cab drove by, the only car on the street, but with the chip in his mouth, he

couldn't call for help.

"Empty your pockets!"

He worked the chip under his tongue to hide it. "I've got nothing else!" Zach heard the fear and bullshit in his own voice and cringed.

The mugger shook his head, and a sharp pop echoed in Zach's ears. Heat and pain flared in his chest, and he realized he'd been shot. His mouth fell open, and a strange squeak came out. He tried to step back, but his knees buckled and he went down. His last thought was that he would die without ever having a real girlfriend.

Chapter 3

Monday, March 16, 12:05 p.m., Washington, DC

Special Agent Andra Bailey closed the report she was writing. Time for lunch. She heard the distinct footsteps of her boss' boot heels and realized she'd waited a minute too long. She turned in her chair and gave a practiced smile to the striking woman glaring down at her.

"I need to see you in my office." SA Lennard was six-one with short platinum hair and a grim expression that somehow didn't hurt her looks.

Bailey stood, feeling short at five-eight. "I'm right behind you." She had no idea what her boss wanted, but projecting confidence was a lifelong habit. She followed Lennard down the hall.

FBI headquarters in Washington, DC, was a blue-chip assignment inside the bureau, and Bailey felt lucky to be there. Not that luck really factored into it. At her original assignment in Denver, she'd simply worked harder than her peers to earn the promotion. She also knew how to manipulate people to get what she wanted—and to make them feel good about it. Her mindset usually felt like a gift. At other times, such as late at night, alone in her apartment, her sociopathic nature was painfully limiting. She was reasonably attractive with thick ginger-red hair that people liked to touch, so she didn't lack for male attention. She just wasn't capable of bonding the way empathetic people were. She'd had her share of affairs when she was younger, but her lovers had wanted more than she could give. In time, she'd simply stopped dating.

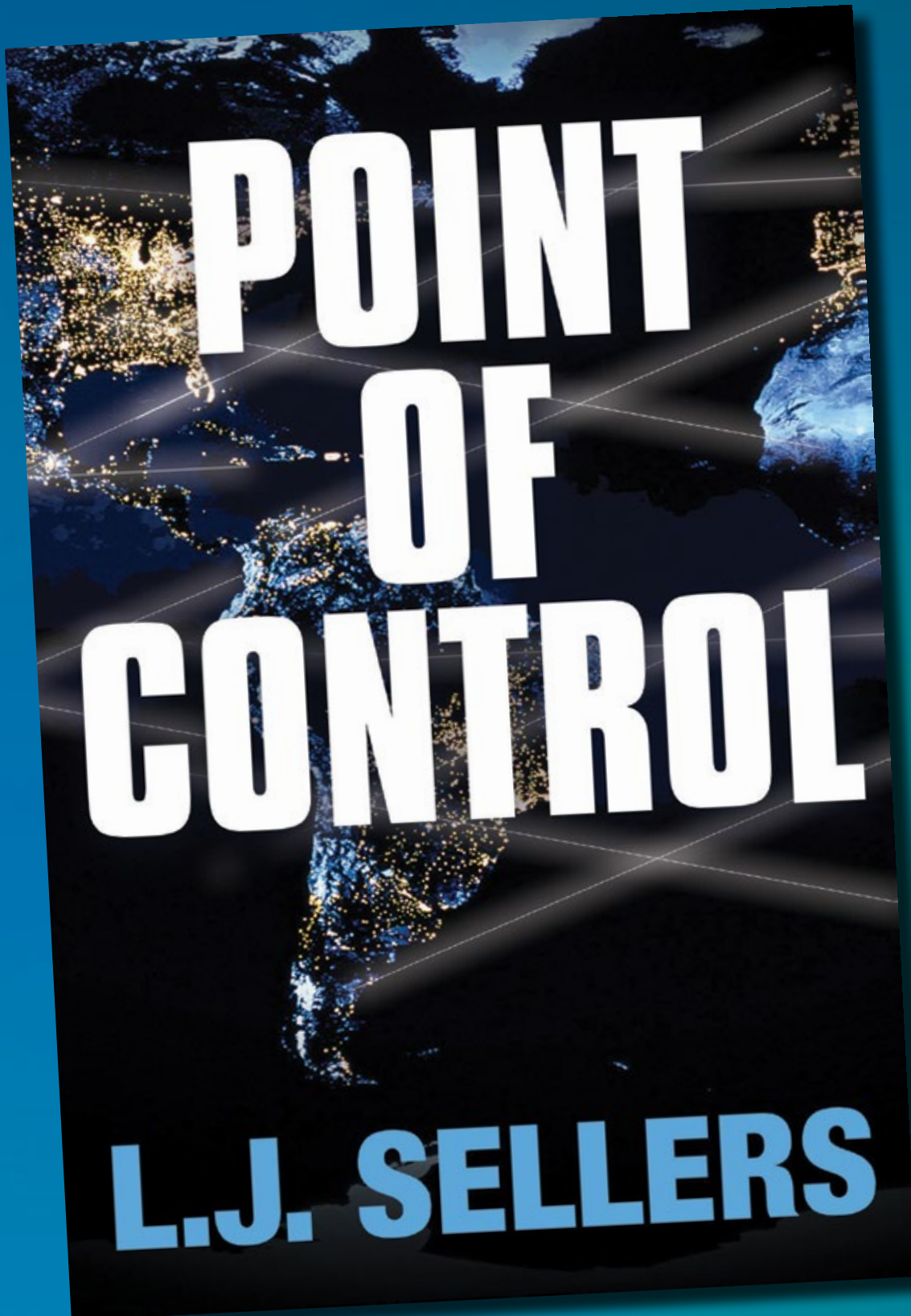
After several twists and turns in the maze-like building, they came to a corner office. Brent Haywood, the bureau's second in command, stood outside Lennard's door. *Good news.* If the assistant director was involved, this case was a big deal. Bailey nodded at the AD, and the three stepped into the office. Lennard closed the door and took a seat behind her shiny metal desk. Haywood, an ex-football player who shaved his head to hide the gray, continued to stand.

Lennard glanced at him, then looked at Bailey. "We have an issue developing that could turn out to be nothing, or it could be a global crime spree." ■

Excerpt from "Point of Control" by L.J. Sellers (Thomas & Mercer, January 2016)

From the author of the bestselling Detective Jackson series:

*A sociopathic FBI agent
hunts a power-mad villain.*



*“L.J.Sellers
outdoes herself
in POINT OF
CONTROL, a
nonstop action
juggernaut!”*

—Tim Hallinan

*“A heart-
pounding
thriller that is
smart as all
get-out.”*

—J. Carson Black

This novel is
available in print,
ebook, and audio
formats.

<http://ljsellers.com>

SUSPENSE MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEWS INSIDE THE PAGES

DYING TO TELL

By T.J. O'Connor

In this series, Detective Oliver Tucker (AKA: Tuck) was killed when he got up one night and investigated a noise downstairs in his house. When Tuck “woke up,” he saw his own dead body and his wife, Angel, crying over it. At that point he knew that life, or now death, would never be the same. However, his faithful dog can see him and hear him. And now Angel can also hear his voice, yet the sight of him is not a gift she’s been granted. What Tuck now does is solve mysteries from the afterlife.

In this newest case, Angel is almost killed and a banker, William Mendelson, is found murdered in a hidden vault in the basement of his bank, where ancient Egyptian relics and World War II secrets are also held.

The “Detective for the Dead,” Oliver Tucker, knows that there is something fishy about Mendelson’s murder that goes beyond a slew of family secrets and old antiquities dating back thousands of years. So Tuck, with the help of Angel and one of his previous partners, is going on the hunt for Mendelson’s killer.

Tuck is guided by his grandfather, Captain Oliver Tucker I, World War II OSS, who is also dead. Captain Tucker is still on a mission of his own from the year 1942, as murderers and spies move down into a small town in Virginia. As the case continues, Tuck still has to get used to the distance between he and his wife...and the emotions within the plot are at times hard to handle.

In the end, this is a great ghost story, preceded by two others. And hopefully it is not the last, as readers will want to see Tuck again and again from the great beyond.

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



A FAMILIAR TAIL

By Delia James

A most memorable main character starring in this new series called, *A Witch’s Cat Mystery*, is Annabelle Amelia Blessingsound Britton. The name, a bit excessive perhaps, was also a good thing. This was grandma’s dying wish to have a namesake, and as Annabelle was on the way, her parents thought, why not? What can it hurt? Well, there was the fact that grandma with the long name was not departing the Earth anytime soon...maybe even never.

Some years later, Annabelle is now an artist and illustrator; unmarried, but not for lack of trying. She decides to spend some time in the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Upon arrival, she discovers a dark gray cat by the name of Alistair (AKA: The Spooky Cat) sitting in the front seat of her car; a car, by the way, that was locked up tight. Following him, the cat leads her to a fascinating little cottage. Inside, Annabelle finds that she is in the midst of a whole lot of trouble. Seems that once she crossed the threshold she immediately held a witch’s wand in her hand and realized that the furry cat was her very own familiar.

Annabelle comes upon a pleasant group of ladies who use spells, charms and potions to keep the people of Portsmouth safe from harm. Very soon after meeting this group, she finds out that Alistair’s previous owner died under extremely unusual conditions. When another local person is killed, Annabelle decides that since she’s in the position of being one who holds magic, she, her new friends, and Alistair must hunt for the culprit and stop the crimes before another soul is erased.

Much like *Bewitched*, the feline in this one is a blast, and Annabelle is perfect when it comes to magical thinking and doing in New Hampshire. It will be more than fun to follow her journey for a good, long time to come.

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

LATENT IMAGE

By Joshua Graham

Most books entertain, fewer inspire, while even less leave us asking questions. “Latent Image” is one of the rare few that will do all three and leave you thirsting for the next *Xandra Carrick* novel.

Xandra is a woman of many gifts, some earthly, others seemingly supernatural. An accomplished photojournalist, as well as a covert Secret Service agent, she is assigned the distinction of being President Jennifer Bradley’s personal photographer. Once ensconced inside the president’s inner circle, Xandra soon gains the trust of the POTUS’ son, Mikey.

In “Latent Image,” Joshua Graham takes us on a blistering thrill-ride through a maze of terrorism, intrigue, family bonds, and faith. Faith in each other, faith in our God-given gifts, and faith in ourselves.

A plot that could easily be pulled from today’s headlines, “Latent Image” reminds us of the good in people and shows us that sacrifice comes in many different packages. Joshua Graham has written a book not to be read, but to be savored.

Reviewed by J.M. LeDuc, author of “Sin,” published by Suspense Publishing, an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■



THE NEWSMAKERS

By Lis Wiehl

In spite of some professional delays in her career, Erica Sparks has at last gotten a break.

As the Global News Networks up-and-coming reporter, she is on her way to making her mark in the news business and is working on her first assignment when a dreadful ferry boat accident occurs in the middle of her live report. The fame that she garners from this accident has brought her to the attention of the ‘big’ news folks. Oddly enough, she once again finds herself in the right place at the right time when another dangerous event occurs and she’s able to break another noteworthy story. Although she’s excited over her successes, Erica is also beginning to wonder if these are really coincidences or something just a little more disturbing.

Think about it for a minute. What if newsmakers can, in fact, *make* news happen? And because of this, they have chosen a beautiful, gifted, talented, and very ambitious reporter to become the luckiest news hawk in town. Of course, there’s more to Erica’s story. She has come to New York to work but brings a terrible secret with her. And even more pressure comes when Erica’s producer, Greg Underwood, becomes more than attractive in her eyes.

First, the Staten Island Ferry crash. Next, an interview with the probable presidential nominee where the nominee actually collapses and Erica tries to save her with CPR while live on TV. Things like this make news ratings rocket, and everyone in the city knows who Erica Sparks is now. But as time moves forward, readers will go through a maze of twists and turns that will honestly make them gasp!

This book is distinctive, with a terrific plot and an imperfect main character who is spellbinding. Kudos to Lis Wiehl for imaginative, yet absolutely believable in this ‘me’ world, great writing. Wiehl has distanced herself from the pack with this one.

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

EVEN DOGS IN THE WIND

By Ian Rankin

The tale begins with a prologue in which two gangsters have entered a forest to bury a body. Sadly, things don't go as planned. When one of the hit men opens the trunk to take out the corpse, the body actually jumps out of the car and takes off. A humorous moment that leads to the incredible story....

Detective Inspector Siobhan Clarke has been called in to investigate a murder. The victim is David Minton, a former Lord Advocate (AKA: Chief Legal Officer of the Scottish Government). To begin, it looks like a robbery gone wrong, until a note is found on the victim's body that states: "I'm going to kill you for what you did."

That evening, as Siobhan and another policeman, Malcolm Fox, are having dinner, they're told that retired gangster, Big Ger Cafferty, has been shot at. The culprit missed, but Cafferty is refusing to talk about it to the police. So DI Clarke suggests bringing in Robert Rebus, a recently retired policeman, to help on the case. Rebus is actually excited about being called in. He's missing the job and needs to be a part of it again. Telling himself that he is a 'consulting detective,' he agrees to speak with the gangster, only to find out that Cafferty has received the same note that was pinned to Minton's body.

DI Fox, however, has been sent on another case. He must help a group of cops on a stakeout, keeping tabs on a Glasgow gangster and his son while they're in Edinburgh looking for an employee that has run with a truck load of drugs.

This book is one in a long running series, going into the past and seeing Rebus's early days with the police force. New DI Malcolm Fox is on the horizon and following very quietly in his footsteps, but Rebus is not ready for the nursing home quite yet. Another awesome Rankin tale, readers will be thrilled to see Rebus again.

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

FOUR DOG'S SAKE

By Lia Farrell

Chester Willis was a reasonably healthy individual who had diabetes that didn't really bother him. He had been asked by his father, who suffered with congenital heart disease, to come and visit him as he wished to see his son before something happened to him. When Chester was coming to care for his father... *he* was the one who died first.

Yes, Chester was murdered, and finding out who the killer is will be almost impossible. Chester dies on arrival at the hospital where Dr. Lucy Ingram works. The medical 'powers that be' call Chester's death a suicide from an insulin overdose, but Lucy doesn't think suicide played a part at all. Asking for another autopsy to be done, Lucy finds an injection site that proves someone else administered the lethal dose of insulin.

A few days later, Chester's father does pass away and the family gears up for the reading of the Will. Chester's father had left most of his wealth to his two sons. But when Chester died, the oldest son is now trying to contest the Will because he wants it all. The question soon becomes, who stood to benefit most from Chester's early demise. The simple answer would be Rick, the brother, who is in debt up to his eyebrows and has a very expensive girlfriend. Brooke, a struggling massage therapist, made friends with the father before he passed. And the list of people gets longer as Sheriff Bradley and Chief Detective Wayne Nichols come onto the case. As there are secrets in everyone's lives in this story, the law has a lot to do. The sheriff has a good team and really needs it.

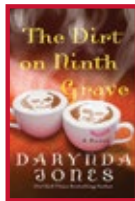
There is a lot of action in this book, and the author gives a wonderful view of the motivation of a real killer. This is one fast-paced cozy that keeps you on your toes.

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



THE DIRT ON NINTH GRAVE

By Darynda Jones



Charley Davidson isn't quite feeling like herself. In fact, after waking up in an empty alley in Sleepy Hollow, New York, with only the clothes on her back, a large diamond ring, and a mind-numbing case of amnesia, she's not sure who she is at all. But with the help of generous strangers she lands a job at a local diner and a temporary name: Janey Doerr. Now she just needs to figure out who the heck she really is.

Janey is oddly comforted by the regulars at the diner, though she's not entirely positive why some of them seem to be big, fat liars. They appear to know things about her, but no one's talking. Nevertheless, their brand of comfort is just what she needs once she realizes she's not like all the other girls. First problem: she sees dead people. Janey's sure that can't be good and equally positive she can't tell anyone. The new friends she's made would definitely hand her a one-way ticket to a padded room. She can't even tell her new BFF, Cookie, with whom she really feels a connection, even though it's strange that Cookie keeps calling her Charley.

One of the regulars at the diner—a dangerously handsome, otherworldly man—named Reyes Farrow, becomes the cause of below-the-belt frustration. He's so hot, he's on fire. Reyes is clearly in cahoots with the others to keep info away from Janey, but she's not above using her feminine wiles to extract what he may be hiding.

Janey is working on finding out the truth, dealing with craziness in her life and trying to stay out of trouble, when someone makes an attempt on her life. She's left with one choice: remember who she is fast, or die.

Jones can't write fast enough for me. The unconventional cast of characters is just this side of perfect and their unexpected laugh-out-loud antics make you wish you could become part of the crew. Grab a pint of ice cream, put on comfy pajamas, and dig in.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■

KARMA'S A KILLER

By Tracy Weber



Kate Davidson is a yoga instructor and loves offering her clients different kinds of classes at her studio. She strives to help people find the benefits of yoga, whether they are pregnant or old or new to the yoga world. But even Kate has never held a yoga class for dogs. She agrees to teach a "doga" at an animal rescue fundraiser and, although not really sure how to teach canines, is determined to give it her all. During the event, a fire and a drowning take place: not exactly a happy time for dog yoga classes.

The police make an arrest and Kate is relieved that the case was solved without her getting involved... until she finds out that the accused claims to be her long lost mother. Kate, along with her boyfriend, Michael, her best friend, Rene, and her German shepherd, Bella, set out to find the killer and prove her "mother's" innocence.

The characters in this story are very well written. Kate is aggressive, smart, funny and a bit cynical. She is also extremely kind and an animal lover who will do anything to help the people and animals she's close to. She loves her dog, Bella, and doesn't think twice about doing what is needed to keep Bella in good shape. In other words, this is a wonderful story for dog lovers, with the other human characters being just as likeable.

There are two other books in this, *The Downward Dog Mystery* series; "A Killer Retreat" and "Murder Strikes a Pose." These books are full of mystery, humor and friendships that are highly recommended to readers who want a good mystery and enjoy a fun cozy.

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

DEAD TO THE LAST DROP

By Cleo Coyle

This incredible series has now arrived at book number fifteen, and is still going strong!

As many readers probably know, the mysteries circle around a coffeehouse called, The Village Blend, located in Greenwich Village. Said coffeehouse has been owned by the same family since 1895, with Clare Cosi being the present-day manager and working for her former mother-in-law, Madame DuBois.

Clare's daughter, Joy, has moved on to culinary school, and Clare's ex-husband, Madame's son, is a coffee buyer. And she now has a boyfriend who just happens to be an NYPD detective. Even though Clare is the manager and master roaster at the coffeehouse, she is not above serving the customers who come in for a cup of java and a little conversation.

This time out, Clare is visiting Washington, D.C. to open a new Village Blend. She's also been invited to work with a curator at the Smithsonian's "Culinary Salute to Coffee in America."

Sadly, her new Village Blend D.C. is stressing her out, unable to make a decent profit thus far. That is...until the space gets a boost with a new fan who is none other than the daughter of the President of the United States. Clare becomes friendly with the First Young Lady, who has her own private agenda. All of a sudden, just as things are looking up, an employee of the State Department faints in the coffeehouse. Then, the President's daughter comes up missing. The powers that be think that Clare had something to do with the daughter's disappearance, and she and her boyfriend are now thought to be 'enemies of the state.' In other words, they better find the kid before everything comes crashing down.

When the end is tied up, you will love it! Then, not only are you granted an awesome read, but the last few pages are filled with delicious recipes that readers will devour as quickly as the story, itself. This is a 5-star tale!

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

A SONG FOR THE BROKENHEARTED

By William Shaw

This is the third and final chapter of William Shaw's amazing trilogy, and after reading this fantastic book, it will be supremely hard to say goodbye to these characters.

Detective Sergeant "Paddy" Breen, after being shot in the shoulder while on duty, is recuperating in the Devon countryside with ex-DC Helen Tozer. Tozer is his one-time colleague who left the police department to help out on her family's farm. After a while of recuperation, Breen begins to go a bit stir crazy without living and working in the much bigger city of London. More than a little bored, he starts to look into an old case that means quite a lot to Helen. A case that still makes Helen weep, considering her own sister, Alexandra, was assaulted and murdered.

Breen finds missing pages in the files and learns that there was a cover-up at the time of this death that involved a Sergeant named Milkwood, who has since transferred to the Police Drug Squad, and a wealthy landowner named James Fletchet, who was at the time having a secret affair with Alexandra. Now, of course, the man is in the elite tier of politicians and even harder to get at.

When Breen goes to London to follow up on the case, he becomes interested in the men who might have been active many years ago in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising. Going undercover in London clubs, he unearths connections between Milkwood and Fletchet during Kenya's rough times in the 1950's, and attempts to find links to the murdered Alexandra. When Milkwood goes missing, Breen is sure that whoever killed Helen's sister is on the prowl once again.

This is the final tale, and if readers have not read the *Breen and Tozer* trilogy, it is definitely something you do not want to miss.

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

A KIND OF GRIEF

By A.D. Scott

A.D. Scott is back with a sixth entry in her series set in the Scottish Highlands in the late 1950s.

Joanne Ross is still adjusting to her new name and position as, Mrs. McAllister, the wife of newspaperman John McAllister. It's also meant that John's taken on the duties of a father to Joanne's two young daughters. When she spies an interesting story in the local weekly in Sutherland, high up in the northern-most part of Scotland, she offers to follow-up on it for her husband.

An artist living on a farm outside of Sutherland, Alice Ramsey, was charged with witchcraft, an offense still on the books even though it hasn't been brought against anyone in over two centuries. It's suggested that Miss Ramsey, who is well-versed in homeopathic remedies that she'd used to help nursing home residents in the town, gave a pregnant woman a tea that caused her to lose her baby.

When Joanne investigates, she finds that the instigator behind the charges is the town's resident busybody, Mrs. Mackenzie, whose long-suffering son, Callum, is a reporter for the weekly. Joanne meets Miss Ramsey and is impressed by her fierce independence as well as her skill as an artist. Miss Ramsey beats the charges, though in their wake, her privacy is shattered by the efforts of Dougal Forsythe, an art critic who covets Miss Ramsey's work and a person with whom she has a history. Then Joanne learns Ramsey has been found dead, a supposed suicide. Joanne thinks she was too strong-willed to end her own life. When she investigates, Joanne finds there's much more to Ramsey than she thought, including a possible connection to a sketch by Leonardo da Vinci, as well as other secrets.

Scott tells the story from multiple viewpoints, including prefacing each chapter with a pre-history piece from Ramsey's viewpoint. The plot construction gives a nod to Hitchcock with its use of a Maguffin, though it echoes more the leisurely and mannered English mysteries of the 1950s.

Reviewed by David Ingram ■

A SECOND CHANCE AT MURDER

By Diana Orgain

In the first book from this series, *Love or Money Mysteries*, reality TV gets a little too real, as former cop Georgia Thornton, and her boyfriend, Scott, were supposed to live happily ever after when their stint on a reality show came to an end. Sadly, after their few fleeting minutes of fame, reality did kick in and their prize money vanished.

So, Georgia and Scott agree to star in a new program where they will compete against other teams in an athletic voyage across the countryside of Spain, all for a chance to win \$250,000. The competition turns scary when Scott pulls a disappearing act during an overnight camping trip in the Pyrenees Mountains; all that's left behind is his bloody wristwatch and a woman's dead body. With the Spanish authorities ready, willing and able to convict Scott, Georgia goes on the hunt to find him and prove his innocence. She decides that she has to assist the authorities in solving the case, while also having to participate in the competitions required for the reality show using a new partner.

To top it all off, as she investigates, she uncovers more information linking Scott to the crime. It seems that Scott may not be the guy she thought he was, but she's determined to find him, find answers, and win the competition.

This second installment is yet another great story full of surprises and extreme wit. Readers will fall in love with Georgia even more as she has fun with a TV director who will stop at nothing to achieve great ratings. Way more fun than actual reality TV, here's one fan who's hoping that book three will be written immediately.

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





FIND HER

By Lisa Gardner

When it comes to author Lisa Gardner, the tales she writes are always extreme gems in the literary world, and this is no exception.

"Find Her" opens on a woman who is seen naked, bound and gagged, standing next to a man who is very dead in a garage. Enter Detective D.D. Warren, whose job may just turn out to be trying to figure out who the real victim is in the scenario.

Flora Dane is the woman in the garage. Flora has been through heck before. In fact, it was seven years ago that Flora had been kidnapped and held by her captor for four hundred and seventy-two days. When she was finally rescued from that situation, Flora's entire attitude and persona was different. Detective Warren has a sneaking suspicion that, because of that horrible past, Flora has turned into a predator hunter. Flora's own walls are covered with pictures of missing women from the Boston area. And when Flora again disappears, Warren must head down the path to catching a very smart serial kidnapper/murderer.

Warren hopes above all that some of these women are still alive, as she follows clues left behind by none other than Flora Dane. There is a menacing predator among the masses, and all Warren knows is that Flora Dane, whether hero or hunter, is at the core of yet another crime.

This is a Gardner read which means this is a great read. Not only a fantastic mystery, but attempting to figure out who's going to expose this killer once found is even more fun. Readers will love Flora, whether victim or vigilante, and if there are any people out there who have not read a Gardner tale (which would be hard to believe), this is the place to start!

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

RUNAWAY

By Peter May

The narration begins in 1965, when Jack Mackay runs away from Glasgow with his friends to see London, thinking that this would be the beginning of their lives. The boys had their own band and were a strong-minded group, determined to be a huge success and make a name for themselves in the big city. Talk about a diversified clan, this gang included a Jewish boy, a Jehovah Witness, a mechanic and, of course, Jack, who had just been expelled from school. With a 'Beatles' type wish, their rebellion in the 60's was really not unusual as they fled home in search of stardom.

However, they soon find out that London is a place that has a dark side all its own. There are parts of the city where young people can find themselves being controlled by some very shady characters, and the boys' London adventure ends with a killing. As a few more tragic events occur, their friendships are pushed to the very brink of destruction, and soon three of them return back to Glasgow.

Fifty years later, in 2015, a brutal killing forces the three, now in their sixties, to go back to London and confront a truth that they have run from for five decades. One member of the group, Maurie, is ill with cancer, and reveals that the person everyone thought was a killer years ago is actually not. In fact, Maurie knows who really committed the crime they have tried so hard to bury. He asks Jack and Dave, along with Jack's grandson, Rick, to go back to London to put things right.

"Runaway" is an interesting tale that will have readers engrossed by the time the real revelation comes to pass.

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



PLAGUE

By Matthew James

"Plague" erupts from these pages in a steroid-filled tornado of terror and shock.

We're all aware of what the Nazi's were capable of during WWII—their horrific war crimes, including Mengele's scientific developments and experiments into biological weapons. "Plague" takes such concepts and hits us over the head with the reality of such experimentation. What if the things we read about were true? What if they were working on creating a super soldier who would have turned the outcome of the war on its head? And what if such a creation is still alive?

Logan Reed, a former SAS black ops officer has taken a position as a game warden in Tanzania, alongside his sister, CJ, a zoologist, and Fitz, a fellow SAS officer. Their job is simple yet complex: stop poachers in their efforts to kill for ivory.

A poacher and his team of *animal terrorists* stumble upon a graveyard of elephants with huge tusks. While digging them out, he also finds the bodies of German soldiers dating back to WWII. While trying to dislodge a body, he is cut. Soon he finds himself thirsting for flesh and blood in a way that is ravenous. With each feeding his body develops greater strength and his mind seems to recede until he forgets who he was. All he knows is the hunt.

Reed and his men find the very recent remains of animals and humans near what they soon realize was some sort of Nazi bunker. A bunker that should have been empty *and dead* seventy years earlier.

Once you pick up "Plague," you won't be able to put it down; and once you've finished, you'll hunger for the next installment of the *God Blood* novels.

Matthew James is a talented young author who has stormed onto the scene with his *Hank Boyd* series and has cemented his place among the finest new talents with "Plague." Once you begin, you'll be bitten by the virus of his imagination.

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

FUDGING THE BOOKS

By Daryl Wood Gerber

A great story that is full of one conspiracy after another. Set in the very cool town of Crystal Cove, California, Pirate Week is about to begin. This is the week that celebrates pirates, held during the first week of February, and brings in a whole bunch of tourists.

Jenna Hart is the owner of the local bookstore, The Cookbook Nook, and is really busy filling her store with Chocolate cookbooks and hosting the local Chocolate Cookbook Club's meeting. She is also planning a book signing featuring her friend, Coco Chastain, author of a series of successful cookbooks that are published by a small publishing company called, Foodie Press.

Alison Foodie, owner of the publishing company, also grew up in Crystal Cove, and lots of the locals have written books ...hoping that she will publish them. But when Alison and her editor and photographer arrive, Jenna thinks something is amiss. Her feeling isn't wrong, seeing as that the very next day after the signing Jenna gets a call telling her that Alison is dead, stabbed with a pair of shears. Coco, of course, becomes suspect number one, as the two women had had an argument the previous day.

Jenna, being a good friend, doesn't believe that Coco could be the culprit. But Coco will not say where she was at the time Alison was killed. Ingrid, Alison's editor, also had words with the deceased, claiming that she was about to be promoted at the publishing house but had been fired instead. There are a plentiful number of suspects that come out of the woodwork, and it will take Jenna some time to figure out who did what to who.

As always with this author, the mystery is a whole lot of fun, impossible to figure out, and offers up that great recipe of humor and suspense.

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

MURDER MOST HOWL

By Krista Davis

The Sugar Maple Inn in Wagtail, West Virginia, is a great place to relax and have a good time. Not only is it a friendly place, but it is most of all pet-friendly. The town is holding a Murder Mystery Weekend that will take place at the Inn. The owner of the Inn, Holly Miller's grandma, Oma, is on a cruise, leaving Holly and her staff to entertain the guests.

When the games begin, some of the guests are being a tad bit dishonest about finding and keeping clues. Of course, this is just a game, so Holly doesn't get too antsy about the way they're playing. After all, the mystery weekend has filled the Inn during the normally slow season. The recipe for Holly is great: she has a full house and a blizzard is on the way. Only problem is that when the storm blows in, the lights blow out.

The next morning, Holly's Jack Russell Terrier, Trixie, finds a body. A body that is not part of the mystery games. The corpse is positioned on a bench holding a fake bottle of poison which was one of the game's props. The local deputy is on the scene quickly and begins his investigation of the victim's past, while outside the blizzard has decided to stay and allows no one to leave.

Everyone at the Inn is banding together to solve both the make-believe mystery and the real one before someone else is killed. Holly must deal with the electricity issue, guests and their animals, her own Aunt Birdie (who is not very nice sometimes) and, of course, a dead body. This is one weekend that no one will forget.

This mystery is an excellent one that will keep readers guessing; and the idea of a Mystery Weekend is always a whole lot of fun. Definitely pet-friendly, readers will be looking forward to the next *Paws and Claws* mystery, which can't come too soon for me!

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



A WEE DOSE OF DEATH

By Fran Stewart

This is the second book in a fantastic new series that began with the title, "A Wee Murder in My Shop."

Set in Hamelin, Vermont, which is a lovely little town but not the most likely place to run a shop that focuses on selling bagpipes and tartans, the ScotShop owned and operated by Peggy Winn is thriving.

When readers were first introduced to Peggy, she was in the Scottish Highlands on a transatlantic hunt for some genuine Scottish goods to sell at the shop. When she purchased an old tartan shawl, she'd put it around her shoulders only to find that, along with the shawl, came the ghost of a fourteenth-century Scotsman. Thinking that her vision of the man was just the product of being very tired and having a great imagination, Peggy flew home to Vermont. Only to find a dead body on the floor of her shop. A relative of Peggy's is arrested for the crime and Peggy must ask her ghostly companion to help her figure out whodunit.

With business now booming, Peggy is a busy owner, with thanks to her Scottish companion named Dirk. The modern world is not an easy home for the dead Scotsman and Peggy must use all her strength to keep the ghost in line. The police soon find the body of Peggy's friend Karaline's college professor in a mountain cabin, killed because of his ecological work, and then Karaline is also shot. As a result, Peggy and Dirk decide to find the killer and put him/her away.

Grabbing the reader from the first page, book number two just solidifies the fact that this will be yet *another* terrific series for author Fran Stewart.

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

HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

By James Lee Burke

Most of the time, when someone asks you to describe a book in one word, it's difficult if not impossible. Not so with James Lee Burke's "House of the Rising Sun." It is simply, *haunting*.

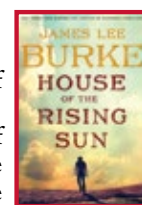
In this masterpiece of storytelling, Burke explores the internal and external demons of a man, Texas Ranger Hackberry Holland. More specifically, the past that haunts him and the mistakes he's made. Set in the late 1800's and early 1900's, we find a man who teeters on the precipice of a changing world. The world of the "old west" is dying and the world of the iron and industrial age is dawning. It's a change he has a hard time dealing with, both as a man and as a *lawman*.

Holland is someone whose heart is in the right place, but his decisions always lead him down the wrong road. Whether that be choosing the wrong women to share his life or choosing the wrong men to make enemies with. He is constantly fighting the inner demons of his past choices and the outward demons of alcohol. When the two combine, they do so in a combustible fusion which can lead to no other end than the subsequent explosion of emotion and action.

Written in a style that is both poetic and visceral, Burke allows us to peer into the lives of those torn apart by war. We follow Hack as he searches for a lost son and the woman he loves, yet each step forward is followed by two steps back.

"House of the Rising Sun" is a book to be savored. It is a book that will hold a special place on your shelves to be read and reread. Like Hack's unquenchable thirst for alcohol and redemption, you will thirst for Burke's unique and exquisite writing style. "House of the Rising Sun" crosses the lines of genre fiction into the realm of a modern literary masterpiece.

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



HOUSE OF EIGHT ORCHIDS

By James Thayer

It is the year 1912, when John Wade and his younger brother, William, are kidnapped. The two boys; John who was five years old and William who was two, were children of the American Consul in Chungking, China. On the day of their abduction, their Amah (sitter) was pushed into an open air store. A large hand seized John's neck, while William was tucked under the kidnapper's other arm. The boys never saw their parents again. Instead, they were taken to the House of 8 Orchids, home of Eunuch Chang who served as Chungking's sinister mob boss.

Jumping ahead twenty-five years, it turns out that at the House of 8 Orchids, the boys were educated by Chang Tao, a feared powerful criminal who groomed John, as any father might, to become a trained assassin and con artist, while William bloomed into an extremely gifted forger. Chang has plans to groom John to take over as his successor. But as World War II begins, China falls into disorder.

William betrays Chang and escapes into central China. Soon, John also leaves in order to search for his missing sibling. Upon John's journey that takes him across China, he meets up with Chinese Warlords, a missionary doctor from Idaho, and some American servicemen. And soon, what would have been his future career, taking over a huge conglomerate from a mob boss, turns into a lethal hunt. Chang is after him, and he won't stop until John pays for his disloyalty.

James Thayer, the very talented storyteller behind this book, always knows how to serve to the reader's delight. The mastery of characters and the ability to bring to life locations that most have never seen, so vividly that they almost seem to be the view out your own window, is incredible. Readers and fans will love this new dose of Thayer's talent.

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

BACK BLAST

By Mark Greaney

I have been a fan of Mark Greaney's *Gray Man* series since its inception, and every time I read the latest gripping saga, I wonder how he can possibly up the action, adrenaline, and emotion the next time. Well, I wonder no longer. "Back Blast" did all that and more.

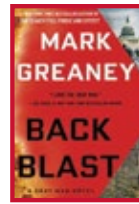
For those who have not read the *Gray Man* series, it evolves around an ex-CIA operative, Court Gentry, who is on the run from the Agency. But he has no idea why. In "Back Blast," the Gray Man, Gentry, has had enough, and he decides it's time to return to the USA and find out why there has been a "kill on sight" order placed on him for the past six years.

With each piece of information exposed and every twist of the plot, Gentry becomes less sure of his actions. Did he make the mistake the Agency said he did and kill the wrong man? Was he set up? And if so, why? The only way to find out is to confront the person who sent him on that mission and then issued the *kill order*. To do that, the Gray Man is going to have to go up against the Agency, hired operatives, old friends, and a few new enemies. Gentry must come face-to-face with his past while fighting inner turmoil along with the best counter-terrorism units the U.S. has to offer.

Mark Greaney has written an espionage-filled, political thriller that soars at a blistering pace. The tension rains down on you from the beginning and builds to a hurricane-strength, heart-pounding climax.

"Back Blast" reminds us that the truth isn't always what we perceive it to be, and sometimes going home is harder than we think, but staying true to self may be the most important virtue one can possess. With "Back Blast," Mark Greaney and the Gray Man are at their absolute best!

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



BLACKOUT

By David Rosenfelt

This is a real gem by author David Rosenfelt; a forceful suspense/thriller that will keep readers focused for hours.

State Police Officer Doug Brock has been after a notorious criminal for a good, long time. Suddenly, this man, Nicholas Bennett, takes someone out who's very close to the officer, sending Brock's investigation into overdrive. Unfortunately, his mind begins to break so undeniably that everything in his life shatters. Suspended from the job he used to love, broken from the woman he was going to marry, it suddenly seems like Nicholas Bennett has buried Brock for good.

Enter... Nate Alvarez. Alvarez, who was once Brock's partner, gets a strange call from Brock stating that they must get together and head to the FBI. Seems that the down-and-out Brock has made a discovery on his own about Bennett and they need to call in the big guns. The call abruptly ends and, instead of racing to the FBI, Brock turns up in a hotel room suffering from a gunshot wound and deep in a coma. When the man wakes up, he not only has no memory of the FBI call, but he also has no recollection of the last several years of his life.

As it is with all of this author's works, a perfect mixture of sarcasm, comedy, anxiety, drama, and thrills come together to make a perfect unit. Readers will see as they shoot through this novel at a fever pitch, that Rosenfelt has not lost one step in his writing; he can still produce and hold that non-stop race from page one on. Enough can't be said here; the plot is spellbinding and will capture readers immediately. And it also doesn't hurt that the author and his wife rescued twenty-five Golden Retrievers and moved them to Maine after living in California. Why is that important? Quick wit, great writing, good heart. Can't get a better combo than that when looking for a great story and an author to idolize.

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



BROTHERHOOD IN DEATH

By J.D. Robb

In the forty-second (yep, that many and still going strong) installment of the *In Death* series, Robb hasn't skipped a beat. Most series fizzle out into the double-digits, or should, but those books often require the author to color inside the lines since their foundations are built in our modern-day lives. For those new to this terrain (which I can't believe there would be any), the world that Eve Dallas and her hot husband, Roarke, occupy is in the distant future, where our everyday boundaries don't hamper the creativity flowing from this first-class author.

Eve's newest case has a very personal connection on multiple levels. Her friend, Dennis Mira, and the husband of NYPSD profiler, Charlotte Mira, is attacked in his grandfather's home. He's slightly injured, but his first call is to his wife requesting the assistance of Eve, because his biggest concern is for his now missing cousin, Edward. Before the attack, he saw Edward in a precarious and bloodied position; now, he's nowhere to be found, along with all the digital proof of his visit.

What starts out as a missing persons case soon turns into a frenzied race to find a murderer, or murderers, who have a twisted sense of justice. Eve and Roarke—her handy-to-have-around civilian consultant—and well-known team, wade through the dark and suspicious world of the upper-crust, where the lines blur and victims don't tear at your heartstrings. But, no matter what, Eve stands for justice. Even justice for those who may not deserve it.

In the unmistakable Robb style, each twist and turn is methodical, meant to build anxiety so that the thrilling end will, as always, produce a gasp. The darkness and depth of the layers unveiled compels the reader to turn the pages that much faster, and the emotional connection to this cast balances the scales. The next installment can't be released soon enough for me, and while it's not a requirement to start at the beginning, I'd be lying if I didn't warn you that you'd be seriously missing out.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab

OUT OF THE BLUES

By Trudy Nan Boyce

Detective Salt, short for Sarah Alt, lives in a gritty world. But this police procedural alternates with a gentle romance. I loved the behind-the-scenes glimpses scattered throughout the story.

Salt's father's suicide when she was ten casts a long shadow on her present-day life. She wears his actual trench coat and lives in his house with his music tapes and his books on depression. The tapes are blues tapes; the books, of course, are about the blues. And Salt has recently left behind the blue uniform of a beat cop, so the title of this novel is a neat, multi-layered pun.

As a new detective, Salt undergoes a hazing of sorts, that she has to work through in order to do her job. Her first case is a cold one, the death of a blues musician who may have been given an intentional "hot" dose. She works through stupid rookie mistakes and false starts, only to end up in her old beat neighborhood, The Homes, in Atlanta, looking for clues and a resolution to the case.

Off the job, we meet Wonder, her dog, and Pepper, her former police partner and present sparring partner. We also enter her dreams, where dogs figure prominently and cases may even be solved.

This debut novel is a different sort of police story—one I think you'll enjoy.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Death in the Time of Ice"

A GALA EVENT

By Sheila Connolly

Meg Corey and Seth Chapin are finally getting married in the ninth *Orchard Mystery* penned by prolific author Sheila Connolly, "A Gala Event." Now that Meg's apple harvest is finally completed, she's free to concentrate on all the details of her fast-approaching nuptials. Except that she's not really "into" planning a wedding. She wants to keep it as simple as possible. No fuss. Food choices left entirely up to the restaurant. A wedding dress? Who knows? Who cares? And then, home restoration expert Seth announces that, as his wedding present to his bride, he plans to renovate Meg's current bathroom and add one more—before the wedding, which is only a few weeks away.

The one thing Meg feels she can easily check off of her to-do list is asking good friend Gail Seldon, head of the Granford Historical Society, to be her matron of honor. But when Meg arrives at the Historical Society, she finds Gail covered in blood after an unexpected encounter with an intruder. The intruder turns out to be former Granford resident Aaron Eastman, just released from prison where he'd been serving a long sentence for the arson deaths of his parents and grandmother.

Trouble is, Aaron can't remember anything about what happened that night, because he was high as the proverbial kite on drugs—his favorite "bad boy" pastime in his younger days. He's come back to town to try and figure out what happened that night, and turns to Meg and Seth to help him. Why not? It's just another item on their to-do list, right?

"A Gala Event" is a real treat for cozy mystery lovers. Deftly plotted and satisfying, with a surprise on every page.

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

HE WILL BE MY RUIN

By K.A. Tucker

A true thriller, this is one book that can't help but be placed on the bestseller shelf in 2016. Tucker has put together a heartbreaking story of a woman who is determined to find the reason behind the senseless death of her best friend.

Maggie Sparkes comes to New York City to pack up and take care of the things left in her best friend's apartment after her friend has committed suicide. Her pal since childhood, Celine Gonzales went to bed one evening, swallowed a bottle of Xanax along with some Maker's Mark, and didn't wake up. But while Maggie is going through Celine's things she comes upon a lockbox hidden in the apartment. As Maggie is examining the box, she finds a florist's card signed "J," along with a photo of very wealthy businessman, Jace Everett. There is also a set of diaries with, oddly, the last one in the group missing, and \$10,000 in cash.

After this discovery, Maggie is convinced that Celine's death was staged and her pal was actually taken out by a murderer. The police don't want to help her out, so she hires a detective to do the dirty work. But, still wanting to sink her teeth into the investigation, Maggie soon finds out that there's a lot she didn't know about her best friend's private life, and by not giving up, she is starting to endanger her own. She is now on the trail of a killer who will not quit until he/she has stopped Maggie and her private detective from getting the answers they crave.

There are many very clever turns in this book that will keep readers in suspense at all times, and when they think that they've solved the mystery of Celine's death, the story will immediately turn and go down another path. This is one fantastic thriller that will keep readers on the edge of any seat, be it recliner or airplane, until the ultimate outcome!

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



FEAR THE DARK

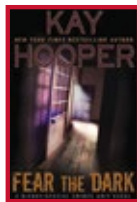
By Kay Hooper

In the small town of Serenity, Tennessee, people are disappearing at a rapid rate. Jonah Riggs, local sheriff, knows when he needs help and he's not too proud to ask for it. With no commonality between the missing persons, and amongst a slew of bizarre occurrences, he calls in the FBI; or, more specifically, the Special Crimes Unit run by Noah Bishop.

Agents Lucas and Samantha Jordan, and new partners, Dante Swann and Robbie Hodge, soon arrive in town. Their unique skills are kept under wraps. After all, the town is already on edge and it's not likely to go well if they start spilling the beans about their unorthodox tactics. When the oddities spike and the crimes turn in an unexpected and very deadly direction, the killer sends a message to the group. They don't know who or what they're up against and the kidnapper turned killer seems to be a whole new brand of monster... a monster who has no idea what he's about to face.

If you're new to Hooper's talent, or the *Bishop/Special Crimes Unit* series, "Fear the Dark" is a good place to start. You'll find helpful information in the back of the book that is great for the new reader, and a nice refresher for those of us who're avid fans. This emotional roller-coaster that Hooper buckles you into offers a wild ride filled with incredible characters at the core of a smartly-written plot. A top ten in my book; Hooper is one of my "go-to" authors. Guaranteed to entertain!

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■



GHOST WANTED

By Carolyn Hart

To me, Carolyn Hart is a reviewer's delight. She pens many series' but this one I absolutely love! It focuses on "Bailey Ruth Raeburn, departed spirit (ghost) of Heaven's Department of Good Intentions."

In this, the fifth book of the series, Wiggins, Bailey Ruth's supervisor, has sent Bailey to help Lorraine Marlow leave Earth and get her into the Kingdom of Heaven. But Lorraine doesn't want to go. She seems to be very happy with her non-life, haunting the Goddard College. Lorraine's ghost still lives in her former home, which was willed to the Goddard Library in Adelaide, Oklahoma (Bailey's very own hometown), and she has been happily haunting the establishment for years.

Lorraine's mission has been to start romances between library patrons, which she does by leaving roses for them. The latest people to receive roses are Joe Cooper, editor of the local paper, and Michelle Hoyt, a senior at the college. Now, however, somebody is using her rose habit to start trouble in the library; from vandalizing and stealing books to... murder. A campus security guard is shot by an intruder and Bailey finds a catalog of evidence blaming a student for the crimes.

Bailey Ruth is convinced that a human is behind these crimes, and as the police get ready to arrest someone, she has some doubts that lead her to do her own investigation. Things seem to go from bad to worse when some very valuable books are stolen and the night watchman is shot. All the evidence available points to Michelle, and as Chief Cobbs is away on his honeymoon, the acting chief is not willing to look at anyone else for the crime. Finding the truth is left mostly in Bailey Ruth's hands as she strives to keep Michelle from living life behind bars.

Leave it to Carolyn Hart to mix her ghostly detective with another mostly happy, humble ghost, in a murderous, sneaky plot that will keep readers intrigued for hours.

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





ANGELS BURNING

By Tawni O'Dell

A body of a young woman is found slowly burning in the fire pits located in Campbell's Run, PA, and Police Chief Dove Carnahan is on the case.

But this is one gory case that seems to have horrible paths leading in every direction. The case begins with the beating of Camio Truly; the girl had her head knocked in before being ditched into the fiery grave. As Dove delves into the investigation, aided by Nolan, a bad-tempered detective and her (sometimes) lover, the facts grow even worse. It is said that practically nobody lives in this town anymore since a sinkhole, which had been lurking underground after a mine fire long ago, opened up, taking a lot of the town into its depths. Since this happened, the population has declined, as people who could afford it moved away.

Dove knows this killer must be local, and finds that the Truly family had more than its share of difficult times even before this murder, including having sons in jail. But Dove is most shocked at the lack of concern shown by Camio's mother, Shawna—an obese, TV addicted woman who cares about nothing but herself. Camio's sister shows far more concern, although she makes it known that she disliked her sister a great deal. And in the position of power in this family sits matriarch Miranda Truly. What she says, goes. And when she says be quiet, no family member speaks.

When word comes that the man who killed Dove's own mother has been released from jail after serving thirty-five years, a new trauma begins when he claims that Dove framed him. Things from her past keep appearing out of nowhere which brings this story to a dramatic, climactic end. The twists in this plot will keep the reader guessing as author O'Dell, yet again, shows why she is among the bestsellers. Her magic is powerful. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■

FLIPPED FOR MURDER

By Maddie Day

Roberta "Robbie" Jordan is starting a new adventure—opening a country store in South Lick, Indiana. Robbie has emotional ties to the town; her recently deceased mother, Jeannie, lived in South Lick before moving to California years before and giving birth to her only child.

When Robbie spots a derelict property badly in need of repair, she jumps at the chance to rehab it, and open Pans 'N Pancakes, providing yummy breakfasts and lunches at affordable prices, plus an assortment of vintage cookware not easily found in other southern Indiana retail establishments.

Although Robbie's grand opening goes well, not everyone in town wants to see the new business thrive. Top on the list is Ed Kowalski, proprietor of Kowalski's General Store in nearby Nashville, who makes it clear that he doesn't want any competition from an out-of-state upstart like Robbie. Stella Rogers, special assistant to South Lick's mayor, a very unpleasant woman, has done everything in her power to make life difficult for the budding entrepreneur. And Don O'Neill, owner of the local hardware store, initially is supportive, but he's hiding a dark secret that could impact Robbie's entire future.

When the heartily disliked Stella is found dead, not too many people in town feel sorry. Except Robbie. Because Stella is found with one of Robbie's signature biscuits stuffed in her mouth. Oy vey. Way to ruin a new business. Robbie knows she had nothing to do with Stella's death, but someone is surely trying to make it look like she did. So Robbie starts asking questions. Lots of questions that make too many locals uncomfortable. One of whom decides to stop Robbie's questions for good.

"Flipped for Murder" is the first in the *Country Store* mystery series by Maddie Day, a pen name of well-known writer Edith Maxwell. It's yummy fun, but don't read it when you're hungry. Unless you're hungry for a good book, and not breakfast!

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

RENEGADE

By Kerry Wilkinson

In this, the second installment in the *Silver Blackthorn* series by Kerry Wilkinson, Silver and her friends; Imrin, Jela, Hart, Faith and Pietra are fugitives after escaping Windsor Castle. They were basically play toys for the King of England, and were used by the king for his games.

Silver is wanted at this time for treason, after she poisoned but did not succeed in killing the king. Now on the run, the group is very confused, and Silver has a reward on her head for her capture: dead or alive. The friends know that they have all put their families in a dangerous situation because of their own actions, causing a price to be placed on everyone's head. First thing they want to do is try to see if their families are still okay, but Silver also wants more than anything to lead them across the country looking for another group of rebels that are known to be threats against the king. Perhaps if they can join together, success could be had.

The various twists in the story of "Renegade" will keep the reader guessing about what will happen next. Book two certainly lives up to the fast-action, fresh plot that came with "Reckoning," but leaves the reader waiting impatiently for "Resurgence" to be published. Being that this is a series, the author takes time allowing readers to learn all about backgrounds, ideas, passions, and delve into all the developing plots. The characters have emotional upsets to take care of, but the author keeps things rocking and rolling as fans get even further into the unique story of Silver.

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

LITTLE PRETTY THINGS

By Lori Rader-Day

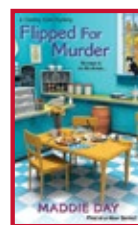
Juliet Townsend has had an unpleasant life, to say the least. Her father passed away and her mother was not able to handle being alone, so Juliet left college to come back and help. But after ten years of doing her dutiful daughter deeds, she's still there.

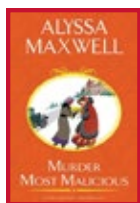
Juliet has a job cleaning and checking in guests at the Mid-Night Inn, a place that barely gets a one-star rating and serves only a certain lowlife type of guest. But she needs a job to make ends meet while she remains stuck in the town she grew up in.

One day, without warning, a guest arrives—her former best buddy, Maddy Bell. In high school Juliet always took second place to Maddy, but they were always able to keep their friendship. When Maddy returns, however, Juliet starts to feel some of the past bitterness she'd kept undercover. And it doesn't help that Maddy has hit the jackpot with her fancy clothing, fancy car, and a huge diamond ring on her finger. Maddy has apparently had nothing but success since leaving school.

Odd part is, she wants very much to have a drink with Juliet. Maddy tries to bring the friendship back; Juliet, however, wants no part of the reunion or whatever motive Maddy might have. Unfortunately, she has no choice but to get involved when Maddy's corpse is discovered. Police Officer Courtney Howard is positive that Juliet is involved in Maddy's death and, as the police are sure that they already have the culprit, Juliet decides she better investigate before she ends up behind bars.

This mystery develops into a really good plot. The emotions of Juliet and Maddy are very realistic (remember those high school days?) and the book's action moves right along. Lori Rader-Day has certainly written a book that will keep you guessing, and remind you that hometowns, unfortunately, never change. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■





MURDER MOST MALICIOUS

By Alyssa Maxwell

This is a super-fun read featuring Lady Phoebe Renshaw and her lady's maid, Eva, as they put aside their society roles to risk their necks in order to catch a killer.

It is December 1918. Following World War I, it's been a difficult year. But now that the Great War has ended and the residents of Foxwood Hall, and their guests, are looking forward to a great Christmas, Phoebe Renshaw overhears her sister, Julia, having a loud fight with Henry Leighton.

Henry is the Marquis of Allerton and the man Julia is supposed to get engaged to. When she refuses to marry him, he tries to blackmail her with a secret he claims to know about a past blunder of hers.

The next morning, the Marquis goes missing, and when the time comes for the family to hand out traditional Christmas gifts to the staff, Eva Huntford opens her gift and discovers a signet ring... with a finger still in it. To top that off, several other people get gifts of fingers, too. They appear to belong to the Marquis who is still among the missing.

When the police are called they find only footprints in the snow that lead away from, and then back to, Foxwood Hall. There is still no sign of the Marquis, but an arrest of one of the servants is made when a cleaver is found in his room and they learn that his sweetheart had been bothered by the missing man. Phoebe and Eva are convinced that the servant is innocent, and with one of them "above" stairs and one "below," they follow their own clues and come to a completely different conclusion leading to the real killer.

It's a while before this is solved, which makes the book even better. The story is so good, you don't want it to end.

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

ALL DRESSED IN WHITE

By Mary Higgins Clark and Alafair Burke

"All Dressed in White" is the second book in the *Under Suspicion* series co-authored by the much-esteemed Mary Higgins Clark, and Alafair Burke.

Laurie Moran's wildly popular crime show, *Under Suspicion*, features profiles of cold cases in hopes of finding a resolution. Missing persons is not their usual forte, but when the mother of Amanda Pierce asks Laurie to help her uncover the truth about her daughter's mysterious disappearance, Laurie agrees to look into the case.

Amanda and Jeff were the golden couple, all set to begin their life together. But, on the eve of their wedding, Amanda vanishes without a trace. Had she simply walked away or did someone murder her? Who stood to gain from her death? Who were her enemies? What secrets will float to the surface once Laurie and her team start digging around in the past? Will they find Amanda dead... or alive?

I love cold case mysteries more than any other type, so after reading, "The Cinderella Murder," I knew this series was for me. While the first book was very good, this second installment is even better.

It's bad enough when someone is murdered and years pass without justice being served, but when someone disappears for five long years, it's unlikely they simply ran away. Still, by now the details are murky, there is no body, no proof of a crime, and people have moved forward with their lives. But, bringing all the players back together to tape the show reveals a few cracks in the armor within Amanda's own family, her friends, and with the all-too-perfect fiancé.

This story is absorbing and kept me guessing all the way to the bitter end. I loved it! The pacing is perfect, the story is compelling, the mystery is a real puzzler, and is written by two of my favorite female mystery writers. This is a clean mystery without graphic details and the language is very mild, making this a story everyone can enjoy. 4.5 stars.

Reviewed by Julie Whiteley ▪



TO HELVETICA AND BACK

By Paige Shelton



This new cozy is the first in a brand new mystery series, entitled, *Dangerous Type Mysteries*. Taking place in Star City, Utah, this lovely location is an area for skiers and ski enthusiasts who are looking for the sheer beauty of the best slopes available. But there are also some small shops there that focus on other things besides skiing, and one of these shops is called, The Rescued Word. Owned by Clare Henry and her grandfather, Chester, this shop is focused on rescuing old typewriters and restoring old books. In this particular mystery, they are repairing an antique

Underwood typewriter that will end up being more trouble than its worth.

When someone tries to steal the typewriter, it's a bit of a shock to Clare. After all, who would want an old typewriter enough that they would take the chance to steal it and end up in jail? Turns out, the robber is a stranger to the local townspeople and demands that Clare turn over the machine. But when the police are called, the stranger runs off. Only to be found later that day; his dead body in the alley behind Clare's shop.

All in all, this is an interesting read. Clare loves her work repairing old typewriters and books, and readers will be intrigued by the oddity of the shop. And trying to find out what kind of secret a typewriter could possibly hold that would make someone die for it, is so different from other cozies that an afternoon of reading is what's in store. Not a shock that the writing and plot are well done, considering this is a series coming from the eloquent and fun author who brought *The Country Cooking School Mysteries* and *Farmers' Market Mysteries* to the reading public.

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

ORNAMENTS OF DEATH

By Jane K. Cleland

In the lovely New England town of Rocky Point, New Hampshire, sits Prescott's Antiques. And 'tis the season, which means that the shop is "dressed to the nines" for Josie Prescott's annual Christmas party. Josie is delighted this year because she is about to meet a distant cousin that she didn't even know she had; Ian Bennington, who lives in England and will be in the States for the festivities. Ian has done all the genealogical work and found that he and Josie are descended from one, Arabella Churchill, who was a royal mistress in the seventeenth century.

The party is a huge success and Josie and Ian are happy to be related. Ian tells her he has a daughter named Becca, who has lived in Boston for a year while working on a marine biology project. He acquired, at auction, two very valuable miniatures: one of King James II, and the other of his mistress, their ancestor, Arabella. He had given the miniatures to his daughter and would like Josie to appraise them.

Deciding to go out to lunch the next day, Josie becomes very worried when Ian doesn't show. But Josie's friend, Police Chief Ellis Hunter, wants her to calm down. Ian is a grown man after all, he can go anywhere he wants. Ian did say he would go to his daughter's in Boston to pick up the miniatures. But, like Ian, the miniatures have also gone missing.

There have been at least nine books featuring Josie Prescott and her antiques business, and each one is better than the last. There are fascinating stories about collectibles, and very strong characters. Even loveable ones, like Josie's Maine Coon Cat, Hank. The tale is fraught with identify theft, greed and murder. This is a definite page turner, and I recommend you don't miss out on it.

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

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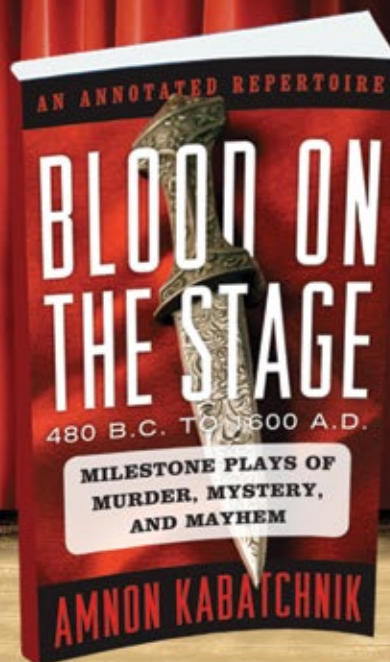
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Runner-Up

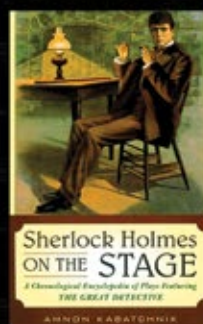
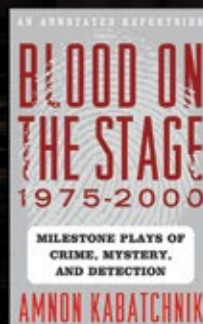
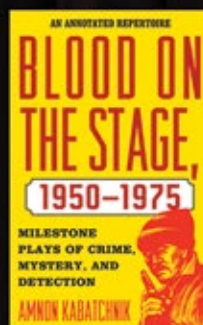
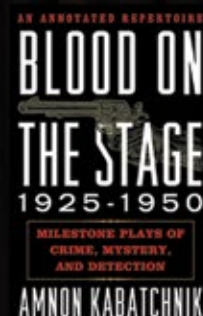
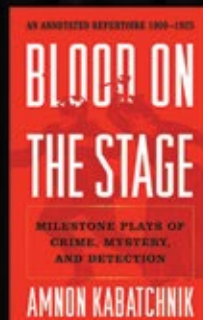
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THE CANDY CANE CUPCAKE KILLER

By Livia J. Washburn

This new book is a great addition to the beloved, *Fresh Baked Mystery* series. Although each and every story is a standalone, they are all a whole lot of fun, with characters that own some of the quickest wits in fiction. Phyllis Newsom is a very pleasant and clever lady. She and her friends are senior citizens in the town of Waterford, Texas, and their sharp minds keep everyone alert.

This time out, Christmas has arrived in the small town and everybody is gearing up with a lot of holiday spirit. The people of Weatherford are having their annual holiday parade and tree-lighting ceremony in the town square when disaster strikes out of nowhere. Phyllis has brought a new cupcake recipe that she thinks will be a winner with the town and gives a sample to rancher, Barney McCrory, to try. Unfortunately, Barney falls down dead after eating the cupcake and Phyllis hopes beyond all hope that his death didn't come from food poisoning.

When it becomes known that the man died of a gunshot wound that he sustained in front of the whole town, Phyllis is let off the hook. But she and her friends, no matter how hard they try not to get involved, do anyway, deciding to get to the bottom of this strange crime. The law, turning away from Phyllis and her cupcake debacle, decide to go after McCrory's daughter and her husband as they are McCrory's heirs. Phyllis gets aid from the TV news crew that have come to get answers about the crime, and soon they decide to help her and her friends in their quest for the truth. "Truth" being a difficult word for a group of tabloid journalists.

The great characters are still what makes these cozies fantastic. Phyllis and her cronies are memorable, the storyline is terrific and fun to read, and some really tasty recipes are given as a true gift to the reader.

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

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

By M.J. Arlidge

The next in a series featuring what other writers have referred to as: "one of the best new series detectives," Helen Grace is back. Detective Grace has a history, one that readers shouldn't miss. And even though this book can stand alone, going back and seeing where Grace began would make it even more thrilling.

In this new mystery, young women with dark hair and baby blue eyes are being snatched away from their homes and families. When their bodies are finally found, the Medical Examiner discovers that they were starved to death by the killer. In addition, each is now sporting an odd bluebird tattoo.

Grace's immediate supervisor is very jealous of Grace; she will do anything to harm Grace's reputation. In this instance, she tries to find a way to get rid of her permanently by not believing what Grace is telling her about the killings. But ... DI Grace goes on, as she is called out to see the body of a dead woman who, according to the Medical Examiner, has been dead for a couple of years. This one is even odder considering that her family doesn't believe she's dead, since they've been receiving texts and tweets from the supposed corpse all along. Helen and her team now must find a serial killer that seems to always be at least one step ahead, while she attempts to put all the pieces together to catch a true monster that is dying to kill again.

This tale is one of those suspense/thrillers that will make you look over your shoulder as you walk down the street, double checking on the people that pass you by to make sure they haven't turned around. A work of fiction that never slows down until the very end, there are so many suspects and so much drama and psychotic folks that your mind will spin. It is definitely fact that Detective Helen Grace is one of the best DI's on the scene. Reviewed by Mary Lignor, Professional Librarian and Co-Owner of *The Write Companion* ■



AWAY IN A MANGER

By Rhys Bowen

Molly Murphy Sullivan is determined to leave her detecting career behind and concentrate on her family now that she is a married woman with a baby son and a young ward to care for. This pleases her handsome husband, Police Captain Daniel Sullivan, who worries that Molly's constant curiosity will land her in trouble.

In "Away in a Manger," the fifteenth in this series, it's almost Christmas in 1905 New York City, and Molly is busy preparing for the upcoming holiday. As she and the children—son Liam and twelve-year-old Bridie—are doing some holiday shopping, they hear the lovely voice of a beggar girl huddled in a doorway singing *Away in a Manger*.

At Bridie's urging, Molly gives the little girl a quarter, and is upset when she sees a boy take the money away from her. Then Molly discovers the boy is the girl's brother, and the two children have recently arrived from England; their mother has disappeared, and they're living with an aunt who is mistreating them. Touched by their plight, Molly promises to take care of the children and find their missing mother.

Then Daniel is seriously injured in the line of duty, and Molly's world is turned upside down. And the arrival of her very critical mother-in-law only serves to add to Molly's stress. (But at least Mrs. Sullivan takes over the cooking!) Molly is torn between her duty to her family and the two beggar children who are counting on her.

Each time I read one of Rhys Bowen's books, I am overwhelmed by her rich characterizations, her intricate plotting, and her rich descriptions of turn-of-the-century New York City. I loved "Away in a Manger." It's a perfect mystery.

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

THE DRUM WITHIN

By James R. Scarantino

Detective Denise Aragon is on the force in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her recent job involves outsmarting corrupt lawyers and judges in order to stop a celebrity artist named Cody Geronimo, who just so happens to kill people to use for his "art." His latest victim is Linda Fager, wife of cold and calculating criminal attorney, Walter Fager. But for the very first time, it seems that Walter wants the police to succeed and bring down the sick artist before he can hurt anyone else. Unfortunately, Marcy Thornton, Walter's former protégé, is defending the killer with a passion.

Most of the police force know that Cody took his celebrity to new horrors. In fact, everyone sitting in court knows that on the night of the murder Cody called his attorney to actually inform her about what he'd done. This phone call is what Detective Aragon plays in court. Sadly, the judge rules that Aragon eavesdropping on a confidential call between attorney and client is illegal. Hence, the murderer runs free and Aragon is suspended.

As Aragon tries to keep her case afloat, Cody trespasses on private property and remains a vicious man. But Aragon will never quit as she deals with the subject of American Indian tribes, their property lines, as well as the social conflicts that crop up when dealing with the law.

A thrilling police story, this gives the real mystery buff a lot to absorb. A major look at justice in all its colors, this incredible author gives us good guys and bad. Cross your fingers, it might just be the start of a new series.

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





NO CURE FOR LOVE

By Peter Robinson

With a foreword by bestselling author Michael Connelly, this book, written by Peter Robinson, is incredible. Not to mention, those are two names that will make readers definitely sit up and take notice. Written before Robinson's *DCI Banks* novels, the police presence in this tale comes in the form of Detective Arvo Hughes.

It is Los Angeles in the 1990's, and the beautiful star of a TV cop show, Sarah Broughton, is being sent some very strange letters. The letters get even more disturbing, considering they are sent right up until the day Sarah falls over a dead body in the sand near her beach house.

When the experts are brought in we meet Arvo Hughes, a detective with the LAPD Threat Management Unit. Excellent at his work, he has seen it all; stalkers, criminals willing to kill themselves and others, as well as killers who grow attached to the people in their fantasies so deeply that they'll do anything to be with them...or take them out. But Detective Hughes cannot find a pattern with this maniac and thinks that Sarah's stalker is far more than just an obsessive fan. This is no stranger; Arvo believes the killer actually knows her. Unfortunately, Sarah is doing all she can to not tell the detective about her history for some unknown reason, which means Hughes must dive into her past to see what he can find.

This is a truly creepy story. Throughout the book the reader gains small glimpses into what the stalker is doing and thinking as his actions increase. This writing formula is extremely interesting. Although, since it was written by Robinson that fact should come as no surprise. He has long owned that perfect way of being able to build up a mystery so silently, that it makes your hair stand on end. This book is certainly a keeper, and Michael Connelly's words just add to the flavor!

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

SANCTUARY BAY

By Laura J. Burns and Melinda Metz

Sarah Merson is a foster kid with a Texas-sized chip on her shoulder. An intelligent girl, Sarah has never quite felt like she belonged anywhere, and her emotions cause her to carry some pretty heavy baggage. She is also different; she has skills that cause life to be even more difficult because she dwells in two worlds: the present and the past. But when Sarah is given the opportunity to attend an elite boarding school called, Sanctuary Bay, it's an opportunity she can't pass up. It's her one chance to join a world that will offer her incredible possibilities, and if she can drop the aforementioned chip, a chance at a lifetime of greatness.

Upon her arrival, Sarah is immediately pulled into the fold by the 'elite' students and finds herself immersed in this new, confusing world. Attracted to Nathan, the class president, Sarah also keeps an eye on the school bad boy, Ethan. When her roommates go missing one strange night, the trust issues she thought she had under control come back with a vengeance. But all is well when she's let in on a little secret. Or...it should be. But some secrets are bigger than they first appear, and harder to keep once they begin to pile up. Something is very wrong at Sanctuary Bay and when things turn into a life or death scenario, Sarah's skills come in handy.

If you're a parent who pre-screens what your kids are picking up, this book does shove at the acceptable boundaries of sex and drugs. But, at its core, "Sanctuary Bay" is a story of the search for acceptance and truth. A solid three-star read.

Reviewed by Shannon Raab ■



THE CAPITALIST

By Peter Steiner

St. John Larrimer is a Wall Street investment banker. By his own definition, he is a man who's a firm believer in capitalism—a supporter of wealth who has been made rich by capitalism and just a bit greedy. Thanks to the Larrimer Fund's astonishing returns, everyone is anxious to be a client of his. However, there is a problem—his whole operation is fake. And, as always, the stock market collapses and some of the biggest investment banks collapse right along with it. Larrimer's rip-off is exposed and he has to run off to his lavish Caribbean hideaway. (Poor thing!) By the time Larrimer's staff and associates are questioned, St. John has disappeared.

Louis Morgon, a former CIA agent who now lives in France, had a little money invested with a money manager who was also taken in by Larrimer. Louis thinks that he can figure out a way to bring Larrimer down. Being one of Larrimer's victims is not acceptable; he doesn't take well to injustice. In other words, Louis decides to come up with a clever plan to make Larrimer pay.

There is another side, however. Some of Larrimer's victims were also crooks; for instance, a group of Russian mobsters who practically owned a Swiss Bank. So Louis, with the Russians on his tail, sets out to find Larrimer and bring him back from wherever he's hiding. His plan uses some forged paintings as bait, and with the assistance of a computer maven, a hair stylist from Newark, Larrimer's former secretary, and a cat named Arthur, he moves ahead. This extremely odd 'band of brothers' sets out to stop a master crook.

It will be almost impossible for readers to put this one down. So if you can get away with it, lock yourself in a room and delve into this super-amazing novel!

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

AFTER SHE'S GONE

By Lisa Jackson

In a previous book by Lisa Jackson, Cassie Kramer and her sister, Allie, were almost killed by a crazed fan who'd attacked their mother—former movie star, Jenna Hughes. On a good note, they all survived, and Mom is now retired from the movie business and living in Oregon on a ranch with her second husband. Cassie moved to Hollywood to get into the movies and asked Allie to join her.

When this book begins, Allie has become more popular than Cassie in the world of Hollywood, and much more driven to get to the top of the A-list in Tinseltown. Unfortunately, Allie comes up missing right after her body double is nearly killed on the set of her newest film, and Cassie checks herself into a psychiatric hospital, incapable of handling the stress.

Following the event of their mother's attack, Cassie began suffering from blackouts and losing track of time. This does not help one bit when Cassie was the last person to have talked to Allie before she vanished, and their rivalry concerning movie roles is known to all. Both of the sisters actually had a part in the film: Cassie with a bit part, and Allie the star. In other words, Cassie quickly becomes a suspect in Allie's disappearance, and after a few days in the hospital, she decides to check herself out and investigate.

Their family members are people who have gained fame and been knocked down more than once over the years, and Cassie could be next in line. But when she teams up with her almost ex-husband, Trent, this complicated plot goes from slow to exciting in seconds.

With so many characters being thrown in at once, it was the second half of this novel that turned out to be the most enjoyable. But, as with all Lisa Jackson's incredible works, there was enough given to make the reader beg for more.

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

THE BONE LABYRINTH

By James Rollins

This is, *yet another*, dynamic, action-packed, intelligent, thrilling book by a true writing master. Rollins uses his imagination and skill to take readers on a journey that uncovers mysteries buried within our own DNA. As the master states: "A mystery that will leave readers changed forever." It is important to note, these are not empty words. This is the god's honest truth.

This work of art spans 50,000 years of history, and actually unveils a sinister look at our advancement as a human race and, if not careful, our extermination. In Croatia, in the mountains, an archaeologist is faced with an out of the ordinary discovery: an underground Catholic chapel that has been hidden for years and holds the bones of a Neanderthal woman. In this same cave, primitive paintings are found that tell the story of an immense battle between tribes of Neanderthals and monstrous shadowy figures that no one can identify. Before any answers can be found, the investigation team is attacked, and an assault is made upon a primate research center near Atlanta. Searching for answers as to who is behind these horrible attacks will bring Commander Gray Pierce of Sigma Force information that is unbelievable.

Before this case is over, Sigma Force will have to trace evolution in a way that will perhaps send them into a battle for the future of humankind. Their mission will take them from Ecuador, where they see ancient tunnels that span the whole of South America, to a place holding old bones of our ancestors to disclosures concerning everything from the lost continent of Atlantis to the very first steps ever taken on the moon.

Readers will find this book so fascinating it will be impossible to put down. Yes, it is important to note that the words: "This is a work of fiction," do appear at the beginning of the story. Because by the time you go through this heart-pounding, unforgettable tale, you may not be so sure.

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

MISSING PIECES

By Heather Gudenkauf

This is a novel of suspense and mystery within a family that may not be what it seems. Sarah Quinlan has a stable life and a happy marriage in Larkspur Lake, Montana, with her husband and daughters, who are off at college. She writes an advice column called, Dear Astrid, to keep her hand in journalism. They haven't felt the need to even leave Montana for years.

Sarah accompanies her husband Jack home to Penny Gate, Minneapolis, to visit his elderly Aunt Julia after she's taken a fall and is in bad shape. He hasn't been home for twenty years. Sarah welcomes the chance to finally meet the family Jack has told her so little of. She wants to learn more about his early childhood, his parents' deaths, and what his relatives are like.

The family dynamics are uncomfortable from the start and she feels everyone is hiding something from her. Jack, she realizes, has been avoiding going home. Why? She's missing information the rest of the Quinlans seem to know. Little by little, the missing pieces appear, but don't seem to fit together. In fact, the more she learns, the more confused she is, until she doesn't quite know who the man she married actually is or what he's done in the past. She doubts the little she thought she knew about Jack's family—and him. Her journalist instincts take over and she puts herself on the trail of Jack's story, whoever he is, until she realizes someone may be aiming for her. She must find out if she's been living a lie and, if she has, what she can do about it?

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Eine Kleine Murder" ■



BROOKLYN ON FIRE

By Lawrence H. Levy

This new mystery featuring Mary Handley, the first female police officer in Brooklyn, is yet another gem.

Mary has only worked on certain cases and she wants very much to become an official "detective." After she has closed a case with the Brooklyn Police Department, Mary decides to go out on her own for a bit and gets an office in Mr. Laslo's bookshop. Mary is hoping that her previous good work will bring in some clients.

She receives her first case when a lady, Emily Worsham, is sure that her uncle, John Worsham, was murdered, and asks Mary to look into the case. Little does she know that this case will push her into a hunt among the bluebloods of Manhattan and the sleazy politicians who run the city of Brooklyn, which is not yet a borough of New York City.

The Worsham case begins with a bang as the victim's first wife, Arabella, is now married to a man who will do anything to please her but is having a difficult time trying to plow through the upper crust to sit among high society. But when Mary follows Arabella one fine day she meets George Vanderbilt, who is so taken with Mary that he asks to be her assistant on the case. Mary knows having one man in New York society surely doesn't hurt, and the race begins.

This series is full of Mary's conversations with John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. Also, she has the chance to attend a lecture by Benjamin Franklin, himself. There are some debates following the political events of that time concerning New York City and Brooklyn that informs the reader, while also being a marvelous mystery of greed, societal classes and bigotry in the Gilded Age. You will keep these pages turning until the very end, because the way Levy writes is among the truly "high class."

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

MURDER AT THE COURTHOUSE

By A. H. Gabhart

This story begins with Miss Willadean Dearmon, starting her day off by going to the courthouse and arriving at 8:59 a.m. precisely. This is what Miss Dearmon does every day of her life, holding an exact schedule for many duties she takes on in the small town of Hidden Springs.

Yes, perhaps she is the resident busy body, but on this one day there is a snag. Climbing the steps of the courthouse, she comes upon a man she thinks has had a few too many drinks and is sleeping it off. However, it is soon found that Willadean's radar is a bit off, considering that when Deputy Sheriff Michael Keane investigates, he discovers the man is actually dead.

Keane has come back to his hometown from a very nerve-wracking job on the police force in the big city. He's had problems in the busy world and is more than happy to take up a new position as Deputy Sheriff in a familiar locale where very little happens. A dead body is not exactly what he was in the mood for, but his job is to find out who the stranger is and solve the case as fast as possible. And being that this is a very small town, everyone has a theory. When Michael's boss, Sheriff Porter, declares that Michael check out one or two of these theories, he finds himself on a quest that makes his once "quaint" hometown suddenly look more secretive than he ever imagined.

This is a great cozy with many sterling characters representing small towns at their best. This has "rural" stamped all over it, and throwing in a murder so that all the normal characters and their shades of gray come to light, is a whole lot of fun. Gabhart is an author who has a marvelous imagination.

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





THE WIDOW

By Fiona Barton

This crime novel meanders between quite a few points of view, and different points in time, but the story is only enriched by the style, never confused. The reader is always eager to get back to the next step.

There is *The Widow*, who is the central character, of course. Her husband has just died and she's playing the grieving widow, but we learn immediately that she feels relief because he's gone and there will be no more of what she calls "his nonsense."

The story starts in 2010, with the death of the widow's husband, a man who has been hounded by the police and the press for the last three years because of the crime everyone suspects her husband committed back in 2006, where part of the story also takes place. The detective, DI Bob Sparkes, and the reporter, Kate Waters, give their thoughts on the case, on the suspect, Glen Taylor, and his wife, Jean.

A beautiful child, Bella, has been missing since October of 2006, when she was snatched from her yard while her mother, Dawn Elliot, left her there for what she always insists was just a few minutes. By 2007, Glen Taylor was a serious suspect in her kidnapping. The mother, Dawn, tells part of the story, too. She believes her daughter is still alive after all this time and keeps the story before the public as much as she can. After Glen Taylor is killed in a traffic accident, Dawn and the others despair of ever learning where Bella is, either alive or dead. The only hope is *The Widow*, who might know something. She does, in fact, know quite a bit.

The tension and intrigue will take hold of you, draw you in, and not let you go until the climactic end.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Eine Kleine Murder" ■

PACIFIC BURN

By Barry Lancet

This is the third amazing case featuring Jim Brodie, antiques dealer and detective, that will send him from his home in San Francisco to the place he was born, Japan, and back again.

Jim inherited his Tokyo, Japan, investigation agency from his American father. What he really wants to do right now, however, is stay home and look after his six-year-old daughter while selling a few rare pieces of ceramics in various antique deals. But nothing can be that easy.

Jim has just been brought on by the Mayor of San Francisco as a contact for the new Pacific Rim Friendship Program. Jim asks his friend, Japanese artist Ken Nobuki, to attend a meeting with him and city officials regarding the program. After the meeting is over and the two exit the building, they are attacked by a sniper from the roof of the Asian Art Museum.

Brodie escapes but Nobuki is taken to the hospital in a coma. It seems that Nobuki's oldest son had been murdered a week earlier in the Napa Valley, which makes Brodie think that someone is killing off his friend's family one by one. There are suspects galore who could be in the United States or anywhere near the Pacific Rim, so Brodie travels to Washington, D.C. to confront various agencies. From the DHS to the CIA to the FBI, Jim then takes off to Tokyo and begins searching for a well-known assassin, not knowing whether the guy is a real person or simply a rumor.

On the readers' behalf, you don't have to read the Jim Brodie books in sequence, although missing "Japantown" and "Tokyo Kill" would be a real shame. All of these stories have been outstanding, and in this new title, Jim is up against a global conspiracy that is the biggest he has ever seen, while dealing with a killer that even the underworld avoids. Barry Lancet is an incredible suspense author who has "knocked it out of the park" yet again.

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



THE GOOD GOOD-BYE

By Carla Buckley

Be prepared for one surprise after another as Buckley takes us into the lives, past and present, of two families pulled apart and pushed together by their relationships in this domestic/family saga thriller.

The story starts near the end. The restaurant that was founded by Natalie and Vince is faltering. Natalie is fearful for what the future holds, but by the end of the first chapter her world comes crashing down in ways she couldn't have predicted.

Arden, the daughter of Natalie and Theo, and Rory, the daughter of Vince and Gabrielle, have both been badly burned in a fire at their dormitory. It's freshman year for both of them, a year that's supposed to be full of hope for the future. Instead, they lie in critical condition. They're better off than their friend Hunter, though. He died in the blaze.

Accusations swirl as the girls' conditions continue to cause consternation. The girls were raised together, almost as sisters, and had great expectations that have already come tumbling down before the fire. Everyone's lives start to unravel as the parents go through the agonizing wait, hoping for improvement in the girls' conditions. Meanwhile, the reader is taken back through their lives to see how they got to this point—and to wonder how they will go forward.

A gripping, emotional read that will have you following the dim pathways through their lives and their hearts.

Reviewed by Kaye George, author of "Eine Kleine Murder" ■

NEW YORKED

By Rob Hart

Ash McKenna is trying to get over the death of his ex, Chell, and is determined to get revenge for her murder. At the start of the story, he is off on a quest that will take him all over New York City. Born on the Lower East Side of New York, he considers himself an honest, no-nonsense man. His friend from childhood actually calls him: "the most brilliant stupid person I know."

Ash's largest issue is how to stay sober until he finds the person who murdered Chell, who was an exotic dancer and aspiring actress. A murder that took place only hours after she left him a message begging him for protection from some unnamed assailant. Seeing as that Ash was out drinking, he didn't get the message in time. In fact, Chell was dead by the time he saw it. As the guilt rages inside him, he begins his investigation with Ginny Tonic, who is a transgender queen on the Lower East Side. Each path takes him through the NYC neighborhoods where clues seem to spring up, including a dancer that Chell beat out of a job.

The mystery is hard to come by here; the story is difficult. Mostly, it seems to be an after-dark tour of New York's shabbiest places. As Ash tip-toes through the tulips of the world-weary Lower East Side, he meets numerous people who could be members of their own freak-show. But, in the end, the strongest point made in the story is New York, itself. The most vibrant writing comes when scenery and descriptions of the City are given, causing readers to see that the author has a fantastic eye for small details. Unfortunately, the mystery was not up to the par with the City it was set in.

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

THE MAN WITHOUT A SHADOW

By Joyce Carol Oates

This book is absolutely, positively a pure gem. Beginning in 1965, readers meet a young research scientist, Margot Sharpe, and Elihu Hoopes, a man who is suffering from short-term memory as a result of encephalitis (an inflammation of the brain caused by a virus). Elihu "Eli" is working as a stockbroker when he is stricken with the disease; a member of a prominent Philadelphia family, the fever is contracted at the Hoopes's lodge located on Lake George.

Eli is referred to psychologists at the University Neurological Institute and is treated daily, tested by Dr. Milton Ferris and his staff that includes Margot Sharpe. Eli, due to his amnesia, is not able to remember anyone he meets. He looks upon them as if they are meeting for the first time, and his family seems to have abandoned him. He thinks all the time, even creating charcoal drawings that depict a drowned girl beneath the water of a stream near Lake George. He can't remember any tragic event such as this, but it does come to light that his cousin, Gretchen, disappeared one summer...and the family hushed it up.

Margot moves on. She advances in the academic world, but her personal life is a bit wary. Having an affair with married Dr. Ferris, he then steals her work and ideas and she lets him get away with it. Then, she meets up with Eli once again and they get back to work trying to get into Eli's brain and dig up the past that seems to involve a very disturbing murder.

This author writes excellent stories, and this one is no exception. Both Eli and Margot are looking into the past and the present and keeps the readers of this story on their toes. This is a tale full of secrets and lies that culminate into a truly great thriller.

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

PASSENGER 19

By Ward Larsen

In "Passenger 19," readers catch up with Jammer Davis, former Air Force fighter pilot now investigator for the NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board). Jammer is faced with a tough assignment; he is asked to investigate the disappearance of a passenger plane over the jungles of Colombia, and is told that his daughter was on board. When he arrives on scene, the authorities have not yet found the plane, but find it soon after. All the passengers except two are accounted for: Jammer's daughter, Jen, and her seatmate are the "missing."

Jammer sets off in high gear as he rushes to find his daughter and also solve the mystery as to why the plane crashed. The man is determined and will stop at nothing to get his daughter back among the living. Davis starts his investigation immediately and finds that the two pilots and one passenger had been shot before the crash, which means murder led to the destruction of the plane and its victims. Davis also uncovers a more ominous plot behind the disappearance of the two that lead straight to the U.S. Government. As he makes his way plowing through anything or anyone who attempts to slow him down, Jammer continues to fight.

A great read with so much non-stop action that it seems like only minutes have gone by from beginning to end, yet the author adds details in about how to investigate a crash while also perfectly describing the jungle of Columbia, which wouldn't be much of a vacation spot. The problems put in front of Jammer that try to slow down his investigation, coming from the South Americans as well as the U.S., are intelligent. This book is highly recommended for suspense/thriller readers who want authentic characters and a plot so well-written that they immediately want to read it all over again.

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



PLAIN DEAD

By Emma Miller



Rachel Mast has come home to Stone Mill, Pennsylvania, after being away from the small Amish community for a good many years. She has a plan for running a successful Bed & Breakfast in her hometown to bring in tourists and help pick up the local economy. She did leave at one time to live life in the "English" world, but is now intent to return. The one thing she learns quickly, however, is that the past is not forgotten or forgiven very easily.

Her ideas for the B&B are put on the back burner when she hears that a local businessman is missing. A really miserable individual, local newspaperman Bill Billingsly, spreads gossip column tidbits. He is about to tell the town that Rachel was convicted of insider trading when she worked on Wall Street. Rachel is more than upset, seeing as how his ridiculous news could destroy the delicate peace she's made with her family. But before Billingsly can blab, someone kills him by strapping him to his own porch rail and pouring water on him, leaving him outside to freeze to death.

Rachel isn't the only person that has suffered or was about to suffer from his gossip, but she is the only one who is determined to look into the investigation, clear her own name and restore her relationship with Evan Parks, the Pennsylvania detective who is called in on the case. Not only is he State Police, but he is also Rachel's fiancé that she left behind. Instead of letting things slide, Evan begins to treat her as a murder suspect. But when Rachel sees the victim's unpublished stories, she learns that all around her in the Amish community do not have clean records.

This is an excellent mystery that readers will definitely enjoy. Intriguing, the plot of coming home, rejuvenating and repairing relationships while discovering secrets, is a great recipe for suspense.

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

ONE FOOT IN THE GROVE

By Kelly Lane

"One Foot in the Grove" is the first in the new *Olive Grove Mystery* series. It begins in the small town of Abundance, Georgia. This is a town brimming with Southern charm, which means it's filled with locals who love to have gossip fests frequently. It is also the former home of Eva Knox, who has returned to Abundance from New England after leaving her second fiancé at the altar.

Eva has definitely decided to work for her family's olive oil plantation but can't seem to get away from the "local" publicity that is following her around. Things get worse, however, when one night Eva takes a walk in the grove of olive trees and just happens to trip over a dead body.

After calling in the local sheriff, Buck Tanner—who is, of course, the *first* man she left at the altar—Eva becomes his number one suspect. The townspeople have never forgiven her for leaving Buck in shame and taking off eighteen years ago. And now that there's been a murder on her family's farm, even more scorn, gossip, and ridicule fall upon her. As the police begin to look at only her for the crime, it is up to Eva and her sisters, Pep and Daphne, to figure out who the culprit is before gossip turns into a life behind bars.

Along with some new Yankee visitors who are said to be connected to the Mafia, readers will be chomping at the bit to discover the real killer. As a treat for the readers, the last few pages to "chomp" contain mouth-watering recipes from the author, a real olive oil specialist.

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





WHITE COLANDER CRIME

By Victoria Hamilton

This awesome read is the fifth in the *Vintage Kitchen Mystery* series, set during the Christmas season in Queensville, Michigan. Featured character, Jaymie Leighton, is preparing for Christmas with her family and also writing a food column for the local newspaper. Add into all that, the fact that she's spending her time helping with the Queensville grand opening of its Historic Manor that will happen during the upcoming Dicken's Day Festival.

Jaymie has had the job of restoring the Manor's vintage kitchen and is finally going to have the honor of using it to bake cookies that she'll hand out to visitors when they come to tour the Manor. But at the end of a very long day, Jaymie is ready to sleep when she just happens to find the body of Shelby Fretter, a local woman, who has been badly beaten in the workshop of the town's handyman. Jaymie is upset, since she'd witnessed Cody Wainwright with her own eyes—the son of her boss who is the editor of the local paper—hitting Shelby during an argument just a few days before. The police also believe that Cody is the killer and it isn't long before he is arrested. Nan, Cody's mother, pleads with Jaymie to look into the crime and find the real killer. And even though Jaymie doesn't like Cody, she doesn't want to see an innocent person go to prison.

As things unravel, she finds that in the Fretter family there are a list of suspects that could have easily killed Shelby and then set it up to look like Cody had done it. From Shelby's boss to boyfriend to her twin brother, all have secrets that may just reveal that Shelby's killing was connected to another local girl who disappeared.

This is a very well-written cozy, with a main character who is a true heroine who will keep readers intrigued.

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

THE BITTER SEASON

By Tami Hoag

In order to spend more time with her sons, Nikki Liska has moved from working Homicide to Cold Cases. Her very first case is working the death of a sex crimes detective, Ted Duffy, who was shot while chopping wood at his residence. As the victim was a fellow officer, the case has been investigated off and on since it happened over twenty years ago, with every lead that was remotely promising turning into a dead end for the investigators. Nikki doesn't have a lot of great expectations for the solution of this one, but she's going to give it a try.

Every time she finds a person who was, at the time, part of the investigation, she uncovers that they have their own mysterious secrets. Ted Duffy's widow has since married Ted's twin brother. She has put the shooting aside and doesn't want the case opened up because it will just cause pain to her daughter. Nikki then questions a neighbor, who is an older man and just a little bit cranky. She thinks that he knows more than he's saying but he is far too miserable to deal with. His own alibi for the time of the shooting was his wife... a woman who has since disappeared.

In the meantime, Liska's old partner, Kovac, is breaking in a new partner. The two of them land a case involving the death of a professor at the University of Minnesota, and his wife. He and his wife were killed with weapons from his personal collection of swords and knives, and the detectives find out that he wasn't a very pleasant person. And as the two cases that are twenty years apart slowly come together, links between the deaths increase, as Kovac and Liska once again join forces to find the answers.

These two beloved Hoag characters remain great. So much suspense, so much intrigue...Tami Hoag also remains one of the best writers out there.

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



REAL TIGERS

By Mick Herron

Hang on to your hats as this "super" book begins...when Batman and Spiderman meet in London. An out of the ordinary beginning, you say? Well, this is simply the first of many plot twists in this incredible story. This is book number three in the author's *Slough House* series, and for those who do not know the term, a Slough House is the so-called end of the road for MI5 agents. All of these people have messed up their career and now do boring tasks. This time around, however, one of the folks at Slough House has gone missing, and the others are dusting off their skills to look for their coworker—skills that haven't been used out in the world for some time.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, AKA: Regent Park, the important personages at MI5 have their own messes to clean up. There's a new Home Secretary on the horizon who is looking into the intelligence services and keeping things humming; he's also crazy. Apparently lying is necessary for these folks who have brought disloyalty up a notch.

Back at Slough House, Jackson Lamb is the ruler with an iron fist. He doesn't let anything get past him as he protects his little flock of folks that don't seem to belong anywhere. We have a recovered alcoholic, a trying-to-give-up gambler, and Home Secretary Judd.

To say this is a great read is an understatement. This book is not your usual thriller 'good vs. bad.' It's much more like always looking for someone to blame as the action and humor continue to skyrocket.

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

THE WORLD OF RAYMOND CHANDLER: IN HIS OWN WORDS

Edited by Barry Day

This book was a pleasure to read. Bringing to life letters of Chandler's, readers get an in-depth look into Chandler's education and life before becoming a writer, and are offered emotional tales of his wife, Cissy. But the true core, at the center of it all, is Philip Marlowe, life in Los Angeles, and the career of writing.

Intriguing tidbits are found regarding Hollywood productions, like; *The Big Sleep*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Strangers on a Train*. Everything is touched upon as Chandler's life is seen as the life of "the man with no home."

Chandler was balanced when it came to his British education and that of America during the years before WWI. His writings were mostly hardboiled crime stories, as were the books of his equals: Dashiell Hammett, Hemingway, Agatha Christie and others. He even mentions how much he wished he'd had a more 'plotting' brain like that of Erle Stanley Gardner.

For anyone who wishes that 'peek' into Los Angeles, Chandler's letters provide this. He talks about working in Hollywood with Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock. And his best and most beloved character, Philip Marlowe PI, is brought to life as the morally upright knight who walked the 'mean streets' of Hollywood. He delves into which movie actor could've best represented Marlowe on screen, and then provides a look at his own darker side when it came to drinking, loneliness, and the 'dames in his fiction and in his life.'

Not enough can be said in this review regarding the incredible tales that cover these pages. This is a truly entertaining experience that allows readers to walk side by side with a writing genius. In his own words, and with Mr. Day's incredible commentary, the reader can zero in on an extraordinary man who created astonishing works of art. This is a book that all readers, and writers, should enjoy immediately.

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

SUPERSYMMETRY

By David Walton

This is part two of Walton's sci-fi thriller creation; the first being "Superposition."

Fifteen years have passed since the odd events of the previous book. Jacob Kelley is now watching a baseball game when a frightening force destroys the ballpark, and terrorists are blamed.

Sandra Kelley is one/half of Alessandra Kelly. Alex and Sandra Kelley were once the singular "Alessandra," but were split into two people during the previous adventure. Sandra is now a police officer and Alex is a physicist.

Sandra discovers her father, Jacob Kelley's ID, at the destroyed ballpark. However, she also receives a phone call from him, which is completely impossible, of course, seeing as that the body was discovered amongst the rubble. But Sandra wonders: What if Jacob was split into two people just before the explosion occurred?

If so...there is only one explanation: the *varcolac* is back. Fifteen years ago, Jacob Kelley banished the varcolac, but it seems that a scientist, Dr. Ryan Oronzi, has developed a new technology for the military that depends on quantum mechanics. His discovery has given life to the varcolac, which is now on a path of revenge, determined to destroy the entire Kelley family.

This creature begins attacking, and remembering what happened years ago, Sandra and Alex know the varcolac is going to be hard to beat. As the end of the family fast approaches, the two must rely on each other to stay alive. But the creature is not all they need to worry about. Seems that the doctor is more than just a little bit power hungry...power that the varcolac offers up to him.

A good read with many thrills and chills, but very difficult to understand if you have not read the first book. The reader would certainly enjoy it more if they were informed of how the Kelley family was initially transformed. And when both are read back-to-back, this becomes the perfect tale for those sci-fi buffs out there.

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

SHE'S NOT THERE

By Joy Fielding

Readers who crave that perfect suspense/thriller will find this one an absolute standout.

Beginning with a phone call that Caroline Shipley almost doesn't answer, she picks up the receiver expecting a reporter on the other end. What she hears instead is the voice of a young girl saying, "I think my real name is Samantha. I think I'm your daughter." Caroline's heart skips a beat as she absorbs these words, allowing her mind to go back to that fateful night fifteen years before....

The trip to Baja, Mexico, was an anniversary celebration for Caroline and her husband, Hunter. As night approaches, the hotel calls and announces that the baby sitter they hired could not come. Hunter convinces his wife that it'll be just fine for their two children, Samantha and Michelle, to be alone in the hotel room while the couple go out to enjoy their anniversary dinner. Unfortunately, when they return, they discover that their two-year-old, Samantha, has vanished without a trace.

Both the law and the media are quick to blame them, and over the next fifteen years Hunter seeks out younger women as the reporters continue to haunt Caroline on every anniversary of Samantha's disappearance. The other child, Michelle, has turned into a young adult with a drinking problem, resenting the attention her younger sister always receives. Caroline's immediate family; brother, Steve, and her very disapproving mother, add to the difficulties in her life as a divorcee who is struggling to hold on to her teaching job. Into the mess comes Lili, the Canadian girl who believes that she actually is the missing Samantha, yet only Caroline's mother sees a resemblance.

To make a horrible act even worse, Hunter lied to the police long ago, and Caroline strives to cover up truths that could destroy them all. As the family awaits the proof that this new girl is who she says she is, the suspense increases to a point where readers will be absolutely blown away!

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



THE PERMANENT SOLUTION

By Merle McCann



Faced with the fact that her cheating husband was a bigamist, Irish immigrant Riley Gordon, sets out to start life over on the ranch she receives in the divorce. The fact that it comes with a hunky ranch-hand, Cole, doesn't seem to have any downside at all.

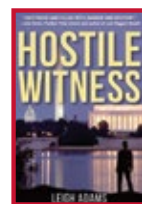
Deciding to improve the ranch to become a resort for the rich and famous who wish to recover from the stresses of their lives, Riley goes all out to make her business one that will rival anything similar and uses general ranch work, under the steady eye of new partner Cole, to bring a sense of normalcy to her guests.

Unfortunately for Riley, she crosses paths with John Farber, a hair-stylist with ulterior motives. He has mixed together a poisonous hair solution that allows him to anonymously dispatch those annoying people in his life, beginning with that soul-crushing mother of his. When his business travels combine with a meeting with a girl band that wronged him in another life, the peaceful resort becomes a den of intrigue and murder. You'll never forget to tip your hair-stylist again!

Reviewed by Mark P. Sadler, author of "Blood on His Hands" published by Suspense Publishing an imprint of *Suspense Magazine* ■

HOSTILE WITNESS

By Leigh Adams



In this debut novel by Leigh Adams, readers are introduced to Kate Ford—a suspended computer security specialist turned detective.

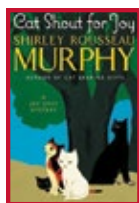
The "odd" thing about Kate is the fact that she suffers from an unusual illness. Kate has spells that seem to be epileptic in nature. Her trouble begins when she's given a new project at her workplace. Working at Robotix, a company that makes robotic vacuum cleaners, pool cleaners, and other robotic devices, causes alarms to be set off in Kate's mind. When something happens that locks her out of the company, she goes to the secure military computers that are hidden in another part of the building and gets locked out again. Being placed on administrative leave for her actions, Kate waits to be fired.

At home now, the time on her hands is spent dealing with her "genius" thirteen-year-old son, and her own father who is in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Kate's father encourages her to get out of the house and find something to do. What she does stumble across is a court case that involves her former boss's daughter and a mentally wounded vet from the Afghan war.

Kate meets a police detective who was taken off the case and he offers to let her use his spare seat in the "reserved" section of the court. Soon, Kate realizes that something is very wrong with the trial and starts her own investigation of Robotix, uncovering corruption of every kind.

A well-written story filled with twists and interesting characters, Kate Ford is an intelligent woman dealing with many physical and mental challenges. Her persistence will remind readers of a dog with a bone, as her interest in a case turns into a full-blown investigation.

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



CAT SHOUT FOR JOY

By Shirley Rousseau Murphy

Get ready for another great cozy! This is number nineteen (if you can believe it), starring Tom Cat Private Investigator Joe Grey and his companion, Dulcie.

The two familiar cats in this series—the crime solvers who help out the police with anonymous phone calls—are awaiting the birth of their first litter of kittens. While Joe and Dulcie await their new arrivals, the humans they watch over are concentrating on their own ideas.

Kate Osborne has purchased the local Pamillon Estate; whereas, Ryan Flannery is busy building a new cat shelter as part of their volunteer rescue project. And we certainly can't forget those bad guys... as they are quite busy on the streets of Molena.

The police department has put on extra patrols to catch a prowler who has been attacking elderly citizens in the area. The cats and the village law don't have any ideas about who the culprit might be, or the reason the citizens are being attacked in the first place. It also doesn't help that so far there have been no witnesses and no clues left behind. When one victim dies leaving everyone in the village looking over their shoulders waiting for the next shoe to drop, the feline babies arrive. But celebration will have to wait, as the murderer is still on the loose and no one is safe until the attacker is found: humans or cats.

Author Shirley Rousseau Murphy is, as always, a great storyteller through both her cats and her humans' eyes. After all this time, these books still are so much fun that they can't be put down, cat lover or not. The *Joe Grey Mystery* series continues to have readers taking another look at their own feline pals, wondering exactly what they understand when it comes to the world around them.

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

NO SHRED OF EVIDENCE

By Charles Todd

Inspector Ian Rutledge of Scotland Yard is back! This newest tale brings the lawman into a tangled mess of settling scores, solving old grievances, buried secrets and a finger-pointing accusation of murder that concerns four very doubtful suspects.

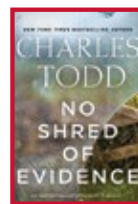
On the Cornish coast, an act of mercy is repaid with an arrest. Four young women, all coming from good families and out sailing, see a young man in a boat that appears to be sinking. During the rescue, a local farmer accuses the women of attempted murder. They are taken into custody and placed under house arrest. Inspector Rutledge is asked by a stunned father to review the case, and he agrees.

Rutledge is told that the investigation is *almost* closed, making it difficult to find out what actually happened since the only witnesses were the women. The man in the boat is now in a coma, and the farmer still insists that the women were the ones trying to kill him. The Inspector realizes that the case will be hard, but he has to figure out if the women did the crime, and why, in a very short time.

As Rutledge searches for the truth, every one of his many skills must be used when dealing with the powerful families of the accused. The parents of the victim, as well as the local law who want to see the four over-privileged females sent straight to prison, are no help. But when another person is savagely attacked, a veil of confusion falls over the town. After all, the women were locked up. Therefore, someone evil must be afoot.

This is, yet another, *Ian Rutledge Mystery* that holds the attention to the very end. The characters, whether poor or pompous, are a whole lot of fun, and watching how Scotland Yard's best solves this puzzle makes it an unforgettable read. Poirot was one name, Holmes was another, and Rutledge deserves to be in that classic pack of crime solvers.

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



POINT OF CONTROL

By L.J. Sellers

Here's a new wrinkle for readers: FBI Agent Andra Bailey (main character) just happens to be a sociopath. Now, for some, that might mean that she's the bad guy in this book...but they would be wrong. Andra is simply one of the thousands of sociopaths that are hardworking, honest people who just happen to work harder to find normalcy.

Bailey may be on *that* side of the sociopathic fence, but the criminal she must track down is definitely standing on the other side. This is a person who lives in society, appearing as normal as he can be. The normal routine he has is fine to the naked eye, yet behind it all he has a plan that involves kidnapping, theft and murder.

It seems that scientists need to find a substitute metal right away, as there is a shortage of a rare metal that is necessary for the encryption of cell phones. Two encryption specialists have been kidnapped and Agent Bailey is assigned to find out what is going on. When the body of a third scientist, Nick Bowman, is found in a remote area northeast of Silicon Valley, Andra's boss shares his belief. He thinks that Milton Thurgood (scientist) murdered scientist, Nick Bowman, because he was jealous of Bowman receiving the International Metallurgy Award and didn't want Bowman to develop an extraction process for rare metals before Thurgood did.

Being sent to San Jose, California, to track down Thurgood, Andra goes on the hunt for a "mad scientist," while a Tech entrepreneur focuses on taking over the market of a very rare element.

This book is a definite page turner for lovers of technology and an original story that definitely has not been done before.

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



FALSE POSITIVE

By Andrew Grant

After an unwarranted suspension, Detective Cooper Devereaux is returning to duty in Birmingham, Alabama. His new partner is Detective Jan Loflin, and their first job together is to search for Ethan Crane, a missing foster care child who's nothing close to a little angel.

Devereaux is also no saint; after leading a life of crime, he earned his blemished record. Once he shot a kid (justly), and he's only hurt 'people who deserved to be hurt,' according to him. But no matter what Cooper believes, his own captain calls him a disgrace. Loflin is also an odd pairing for Devereaux. Damaged from the deep undercover work Loflin did for vice, this is a cop that owns a highly disturbing childhood, and was even a teenage criminal before going straight.

As they begin their case, the mysterious woman that is holding Ethan states that she's planning to give Ethan a treat. She also states that this is something she has done for other children in the past whose backgrounds had followed a similar path. When the detectives try to beat the clock and identify the woman, some suspicion actually lands directly on the shoulders of Loflin. Soon, one corpse that crops up is Hayden Tomcik, a person Devereaux knew personally as a child. Delving into the past, these cops end up with agendas of their own as they uncover many kidnappings of foster children. And while they hunt, the woman who says she's behind it all waits and watches, as Devereaux becomes her very next target.

Although a bit of a slow mid-section at times, this tale moves faster toward the finish line. Best of all, there is a devious twist that will be a big surprise to the reader who, just like the cops, will never see it coming.

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

SECRETS IN THE STONES

By Tessa Harris

Intellectual and always an intriguing main character, Dr. Thomas Silkstone, is back. This 18th century anatomist specializes in uncovering clues by utilizing the anatomy of the victims which ends up leading to justice.

This powerful story pits Dr. Silkstone against enemies known and unknown, while trying to solve four horrific murders—each one more horrible than the one before. His group of suspects are far more advanced when it comes to the manners of death chosen this time around, and a very cunning individual joins the fray who's causing chaos on a noble family's estate in Oxfordshire.

Lady Lydia Farrell trips over the body of Sir Montagu Malthus lying in his study at this estate called, Broughton Hall. In the meantime, Dr. Silkstone has been hurt in a duel with a man who might or might not have killed the man that Lydia has been accused of murdering. Thomas hopes to clear Lydia of the crime and begins by conducting a postmortem on the corpse of Malthus. Using his preeminent detective skills, he finds that Montagu's throat was slit by a blade that was far from ordinary; it was a ceremonial dagger from India which might just be connected to the lost mines of Golconda.

This one fact takes Dr. Silkstone on a quest to find a hidden treasure map. When a mysterious disappearance occurs of a diamond that was cursed and buried with Lydia's dead husband, the anatomist must follow a trail of high ranking dignitaries, royal agents, and even more victims cropping up as he risks his life to find the secrets that lay buried.

If this is the final installment, it is with great heartache that fans will see this series go. An incredible detective, rich and vibrant locations, masterful plots—Dr. Silkstone is a character that should litter the literary scene. A solid five-star read.

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

IF I RUN

By Terri Blackstock

Casey Cox is on the run. Her friend Brent has been murdered, and she was the first to find the body. Her DNA is all over the crime scene, and she knows it. She is also quite sure that the law will never believe the story she has to tell: seems that Brent was investigating her father's suicide and ended up finding proof that her dad was actually murdered.

With pockets full of money that her father had given her specifically for emergencies, Casey gets on a bus in Shreveport, Louisiana, and transforms into Grace Newland after buying an illegal identity.

Back in Shreveport, Dylan Roberts has attended Brent's funeral and is hired by someone in the police department to bring Casey home immediately for questioning. As Dylan tries to find out what possible motive Casey had for killing Brent, "Grace" is trying to establish a new life in Shady Grove, Georgia, thanks to Miss Lucy—an elderly lady she met on the bus.

Searching online for any evidence that Brent could have had about her father's murder, Casey soon doesn't know who to trust when data crops up that some corrupt detectives had a hand in her father's demise. As she looks into her past to figure out what really happened ten years ago, Dylan, who is only a few steps behind, is getting more and more skeptical of her participation in Brent's death. The more he digs into the case, the better he gets to know Casey, and the less the details of the murder make sense.

When these two people finally get together, the questions and answers get extremely difficult, and even more life-threatening events form on the horizon. The author has done a brilliant job (again) in putting together a great mystery set to a fast pace that never lets you down.

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



RISING DARKNESS

By Nancy Mehl

A tale with a spiritual bent, this mystery offers up the lesson of how God leads, and how holding onto the past sometimes gets in the way of being able to move forward. Being the third in the author's *Finding Sanctuary* series, Nancy Mehl writes a slew of twists that the reader will not see coming.



When Sophie Wittenbauer left her Mennonite hometown of Sanctuary, Missouri, it was under a veil of disgrace. Her childhood was most definitely a bumpy ride; her choices sometimes harmed other people, which left Sophie no choice but to leave.

Moving on, getting an entry-level writing job at a newspaper, Sophie overhears office gossip in regards to a prisoner who has knowledge of an unsolved crime that happened years ago. Other reporters are not paying any attention to this data, but Sophie is listening carefully, especially seeing as that she knows the prisoner from her old life back in Sanctuary. Sophie finds out that one of the other suspects is hiding out in the small town in Missouri, and she makes the choice to take on another identity in order to return home and investigate what she's learned. Meeting up with the pastor of the local church, Sophie gets closer and closer to finding the suspect. She is soon confronted with a face from her own past, but the pastor continues to help her conceal the truth of her own history in order to find the criminal, solve the crime, and protect herself before someone puts a stop to it all.

Nancy Mehl is the author of twenty-one books, including this incredible *Finding Sanctuary* series, and for readers who want a great tale, a spell-binding character, and a little religion, this is the perfect mystery.

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

THE EX

By Alafair Burke

Jack Harris is a lonesome widower who lost his wife three years ago during a mass shooting at Penn Station. The boy who shot her, Todd Neeley, took his own life as well. One morning, Jack is out running and sees a woman having a glass of champagne and reading Jack's favorite book. He thinks of his wife and remembers enjoying the same champagne picnics with her. In fact, after the run is over, he can't seem to forget the lady with her book. Jack's best friend, who has made it their mission to help Jack find love again, posts a message on the Web telling about the encounter, and very soon the woman responds and invites Jack to meet her in person.

The next thing you know, Jack is in trouble and his daughter asks lawyer, Olivia Randall, to defend him on a charge of murder. Olivia is not too sure, since Jack was once her own fiancé, but what she is sure of is his innocence. Agreeing to accept the case, Olivia feels Jack needs justice; not to mention, she still feels some guilt about how she treated him previously. Unfortunately, when she begins digging for clues, Olivia finds evidence against her client and begins to suspect that the "ex" she thought she knew may have been a lie.

Enter, the father of the boy who shot Jack's wife. Malcolm Neeley has been found dead with two other people and the police think that Jack shot him in revenge for Molly's death. Jack admits that he was in the area where Neeley was killed, but was only there to meet the woman he'd gone on a blind date with.

As more and more evidence turns up against Jack the prosecution's case grows by leaps and bounds, making Olivia question whether Jack could be the culprit, and making readers question how this amazing author keeps hitting them right out of the park. This is definitely a "must-read."

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





TO BREW OR NOT TO BREW

By Joyce Tremel

This is the first in a new cozy series called, *Brewing Trouble Mysteries*.

Main character, Maxine "Max" O'Hara, has come back from Germany where she earned her brewmaster certification. Max has returned to her hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to open up her very own brewhouse. Right off the bat, things are a little difficult for Max when her assistant, Kurt Schmidt, is killed in one of the vats. Kurt's death is declared an accident by the law, but Max is convinced it was murder, as there have been several pranks played at and on the new brewhouse that escalate as they creep closer to Opening Day.

Max's father just happens to be a homicide detective; the man ruling that the travesty was the product of an "accidental death." But Max is dead-set on finding out who is attempting to ruin her new business before it even gets off the ground.

Beginning by finding a replacement for Kurt, Max is fortunate to discover that a close friend of her brother's, a man who was also Max's childhood crush, is looking for a job. Said friend, Jake Lambert, is a former hockey player who is willing to take the job, so with her business almost ready to open, Max turns away from brewmaster and sets out on the path of catching a killer.

Any new cozy mystery series is certainly a happy time for "cozy" fans. The cast of characters are all played to perfection and will begin to feel, right away, like they are becoming old friends. And, of course, there is a little kitten that Max has just adopted named (you guessed it), Hops. So, with the help of her father, an old love, and an adopted kitty, brewmaster Max will have to act fast so she can get on with life and sell her brand new brew.

A really good plot here; one that is very well-written and will keep readers busy to the very end.

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

TRY NOT TO BREATHE

By Holly Seddon

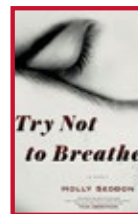
This is a real page-turner! Amy Stevenson was a teen (just fifteen years old) when she disappeared. The police tried to tell her parents that she had just run off, but the parents strongly believed that running away wasn't something that their daughter would have done. Unfortunately, they were correct. Discovered fairly quickly, Amy is very badly beaten, and no one can find out who has done this awful thing. Being that Amy is stuck in a coma, she couldn't help a bit.

Fifteen years after the tragic attack, Amy remains in a coma... forgotten by the headlines and the rest of the world, yet living inside the darkness and crying for help. Alex Dale, a reporter whose writing career has seen better days, is researching a story about a local neurologist when she sees Amy in the hospital. She remembers when the poor girl was assaulted and how many lives were never the same again.

Solving a cold case won't be easy. Alex is barely able to take care of herself because of an alcohol addiction. But the more she digs into the case and interviews people who were closest to Amy back then, Alex is transported back to the past. You see, Alex and Amy grew up in nearby towns. They liked the same music, flirted with the same guys, etc. Amy, left all alone on the ground years ago, and a divorced alcoholic trying to come back to life, make an odd team. In fact, Alex might be heading directly to the same end as Amy... thrown into a coma by a dangerous someone who may still be out there.

Before the end, the truth is known, as each layer unfolds bit by bit for the reader. This book is a debut novel that is a fantastic read; the perfect thriller mixed with deep, dark psychological suspense.

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



VIOLENT CRIMES

By Phillip Margolin

Readers are in for a treat as a new Phillip Margolin arrives on the shelves to begin 2016. The new book is part of a series starring Amanda Jaffe, a D.A. living in Oregon.

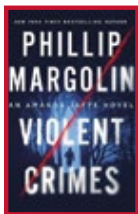
To begin: Christine Larson, of the law firm Masterson, Hamilton, Rickman and Thomas, would like to hire Amanda to defend Tom Beatty, a former Navy SEAL suffering from PTSD who works for the law firm as a paralegal. Tom has recently been in a bar fight with Harold Roux, a bully who began the battle and Tom finished it; Roux is now trying to sue Tom for damages. Amanda goes to court with him and has the charge dismissed, but this is nothing compared to what will happen next.

Someone has killed Christine Larson and her body is discovered in Tom's house. Amanda is sure that she can get bail for him because she's certain that Tom is telling the truth when he says that he had nothing to do with Christine's murder. She also knows that Christine was looking into some very doubtful bookkeeping being done by one of the partners in the law firm right before she was found dead.

Amanda just gets Tom bail when another firm member, Dale Masterson, is murdered. Tom could be the killer, but Dale's son, Brandon, was seen running from the scene of the crime covered in blood. Brandon, an environmental activist, says he wanted to send a message to the public about the way his father and his partners run the law firm and confesses to the crime. His lawyer, of course, turns out to be Amanda, who yet again doesn't believe that the one picked by the police is the true criminal.

Talk about a page-turner! Amanda is great, as always, and in typical Margolin fashion, there is a plot twist that will be a huge surprise.

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



WHAT YOU SEE

By Hank Phillippi Ryan

After reading this novel full of great plots, this fan had a great afternoon. Ms. Ryan has a way of creating characters that are just a little bit imperfect, but not enough to allow you to see the totality of their imperfections.

Jane Ryland is investigating a story and Detective Jake Brogan is solving a crime. Jane has quit a job and interviews for a new one with Channel 2. She is given the task of covering a stabbing that occurred in Curley Park, Boston. Once again, putting her into the position of covering a case that Jake is investigating. Privacy is the main issue of the crime. The fact that there are phones everywhere, cameras on buildings and set atop street lights, and everyone can know everyone else's business at any time. With this murder, which takes place in front of City Hall, it's a given that someone must have been watching. But, the video that takes the picture of the killing lets Jane and Jake into a world where what you see is not always what you get.

While Jane investigates the crime, her sister calls asking for Jane's help to find her future stepchild. Jane is forced to put her family ahead of her job, which she and the cop have in common. They are loyal to their jobs and their families, but if they make a wrong turn things will, and do, turn dicey.

This is a tale told at a frantic pace that involves the abduction of a child, murder, cameras in the sky, and politics. Best sum up for this review comes in the form of Ms. Ryan's own Dedication, repeating a conversation she had with her own father in 1971. Ms. Ryan says: "I have no idea what I'm doing, Dad. Every day, I'm just making it up as I go." From this reader's perspective, I must say: "I don't know what you're doing either, but *please* keep on doing it!"

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

"Robert Kidera is an absolute master of mystery! He grabs you with irresistible intrigue and fresh, seductive writing and refuses to let go while he pummels you with twist after delicious twist. I highly recommend this book and this writer!"

—*NY Times* Bestselling Author Darynda Jones

ROBERT D. KIDERA

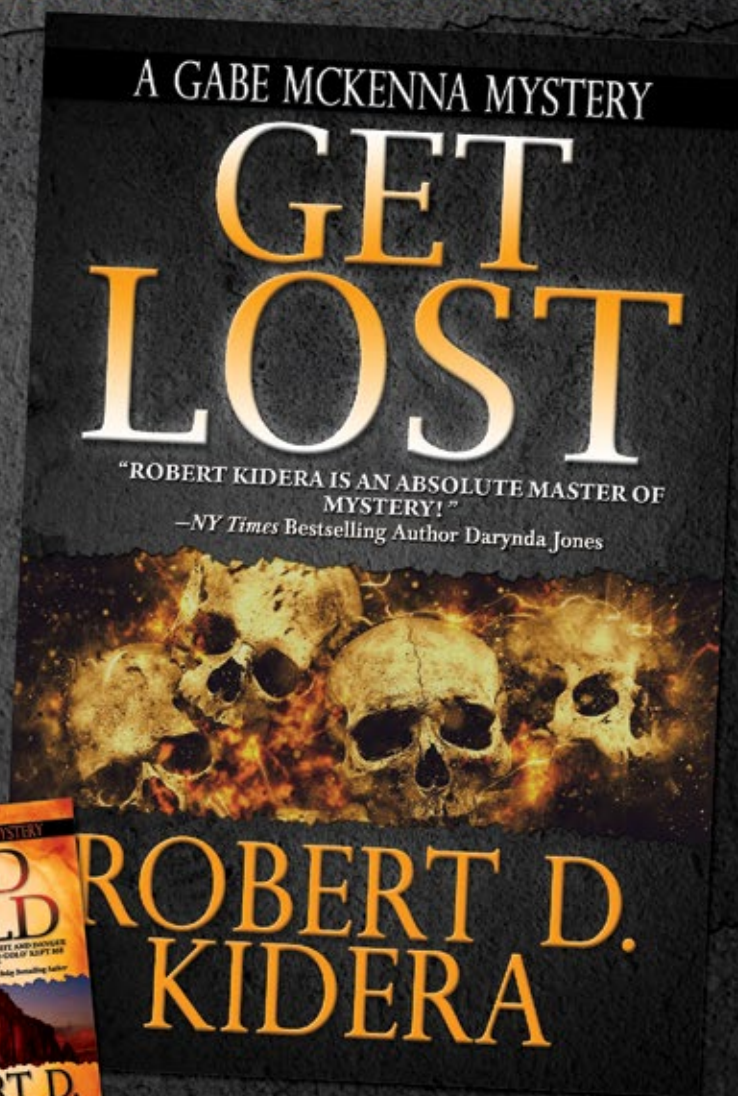
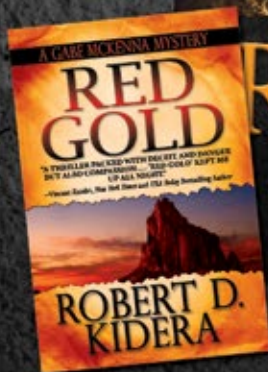
*WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THE DEAD COME
BACK AND YOUR LOVED ONES DISAPPEAR?*

All Gabe McKenna wanted was a new floor for his barn. What he got was seven corpses, all long dead. Seven rich men, missing from New York.

One of his closest childhood friends is gunned down in an Albuquerque casino. After escaping two attempts on his own life and with time running out, McKenna must uncover the connection and prevent his loved ones from joining the growing ranks of the dead.

From New Mexico to New York to a lonely cliff once home to an ancient people, McKenna struggles against a bloodthirsty criminal enterprise for whom money matters more than any man's life.

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**SUSPENSE
PUBLISHING**

Featured Artist

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*

The Evolution of...

jessica alain

hidden room



Canadian artist, Jessica Allain, first came to our attention in 2013, and her work was a great addition to the September/October 2013 edition of *Suspense Magazine*. At the time, we were struck by her use of color and the emotion she was able to convey through her work. We parted ways, but kept an eye on her portfolio and watched as she continued to grow.

Jessica began her journey into digital art and photomanipulation in 2010, when she decided to develop her own website, and that soon led her to DeviantArt. Upon seeing other portfolios, she said, “a lightbulb went off,” and she realized she could design her own artwork. Jessica knew very little about Photoshop and set off to begin learning.

Since 2013, Jessica has further expanded her skillset and has begun building book and cd covers and has recently begun designing and making jewelry which she sells on her ETSY shop (www.etsy.com/ca/shop/EnchantedWhispersArt) where authors may be interested to find some amazing pre-made book cover options. Though, if you don't find what you're looking for, Jessica also takes commission work.

With her full schedule, we were lucky that Jessica was able to sit down with us once again to catch us up. We hope you enjoy!

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Where did your love of art come from? A teacher, a parent, a friend?

Jessica Allain (J.A.): *I have always been artistic, even as a child. Growing up as an only child, I had to find ways to entertain myself and art was a good way of doing that. My grandmother was quite the artist in her own right and always encouraged me to continue in the arts.*

S. MAG.: When we last chatted, *Ice Queen* was your favorite piece, but you've been busy these last three years. Has your favorite changed?

J.A.: *My favorites always change, and honestly all my artworks are my babies in one way or another. This time I sent Bleeding Heart (<http://fav.me/d8ojalc>) as my favorite, but that could easily change day to day.*

S. MAG.: What would you say has changed the most about your artistic vision in the past three years?

J.A.: *I would say that my technical abilities have improved incredibly which allows me to get artworks done faster and more efficiently which is a huge help when doing work for clients.*

S. MAG.: What memorable reactions have you had to your work?

J.A.: *I have had a couple of people who have my artwork tattooed on their own bodies which is a huge compliment.*

S. MAG.: If you had to choose a quote (or a line) to





framed



describe what motivates you day to day, what would it be?

J.A.: *"Life beats down and crushes the soul and art reminds you that you have one."* ~Stella Adler

S. MAG.: You now design book and album covers, what is the biggest challenge you find in dealing with commission work?

J.A.: *The biggest challenge when doing cover art is when a client needs something very specific, where I work with stock photos and the model's facial expressions, body position, etc., and is all dependent upon which stock photos are available for use. Sometimes the client needs to be a little lenient on these things to make a piece work.*

S. MAG.: What is your biggest personal and professional accomplishment?

J.A.: *I took the step in opening my own Etsy shop to sell prints of my artwork and so far it has gone really well. It is a great feeling to be able to sign my prints and send them to customers personally.*

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

J.A.: *Some kind of humanitarian worker.*

S. MAG.: Describe a day in your life.

J.A.: *I typically wake up mid-morning and grab some coffee, feed the cats, and check my email. The first portion of the day is usually spent answering client emails and second half is spent doing work for clients; I tend to be a night owl and stay up working till at least 3 am.*

S. MAG.: What do you think are your best qualities? Worst?

J.A.: *I would say the best qualities are probably my use of color and attention to detail. Worst would probably be my lack of original ideas; I sometimes struggle to come up with imagery for my artwork.*

Thank you, Jessica, for your time. If you would like to learn more about Jessica and her work, check out her Deviant Art site at <http://enchantedwhispers.deviantart.com>. ■



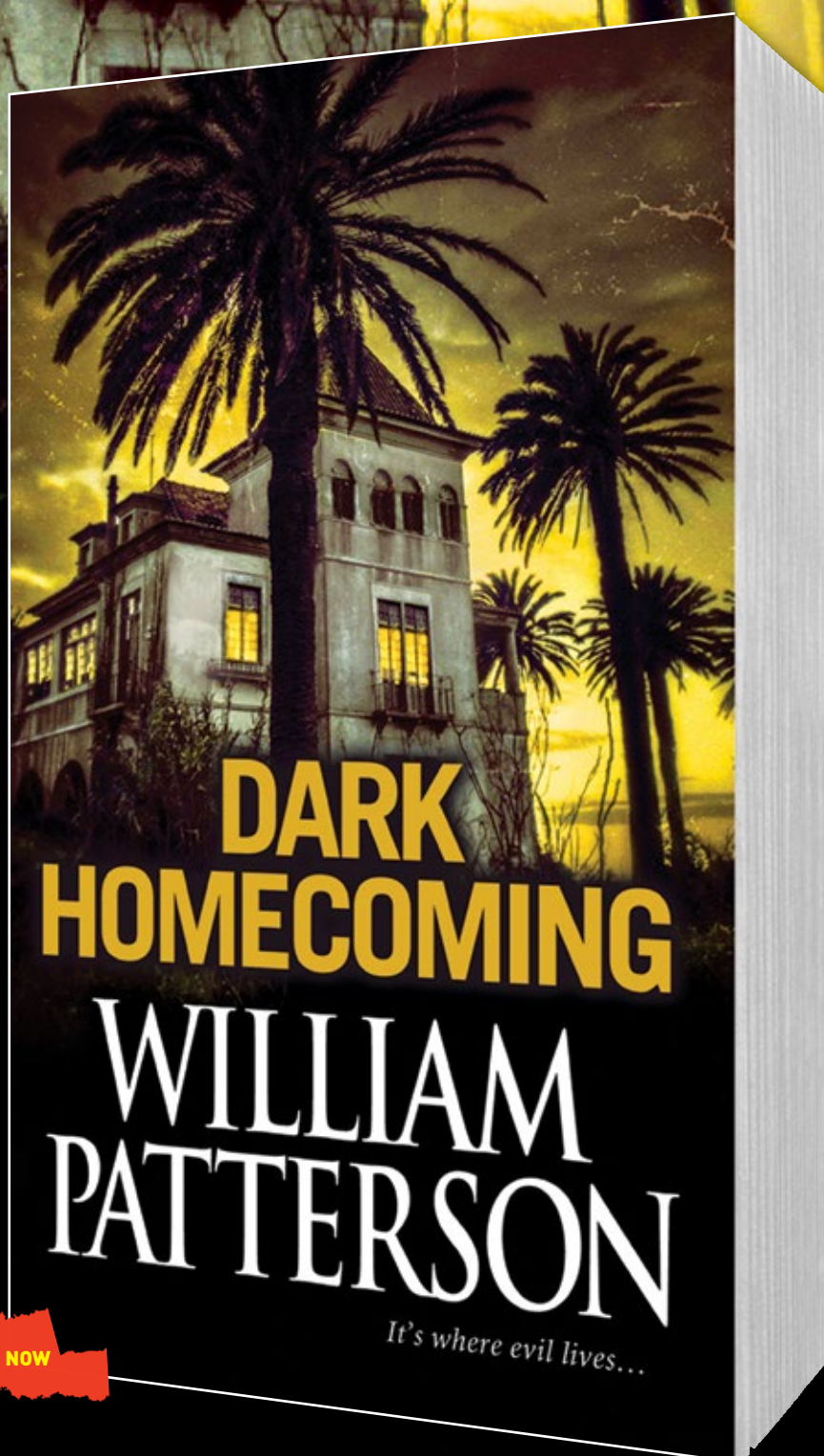
HOME IS WHERE **EVIL** LIVES...

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—KEVIN O'BRIEN,

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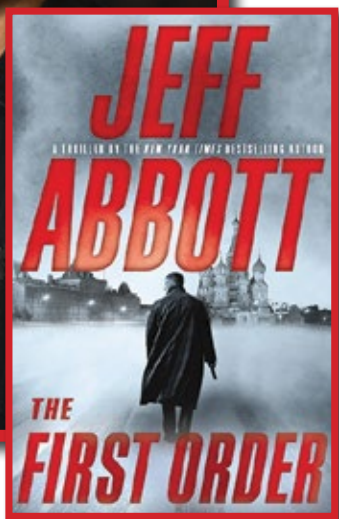
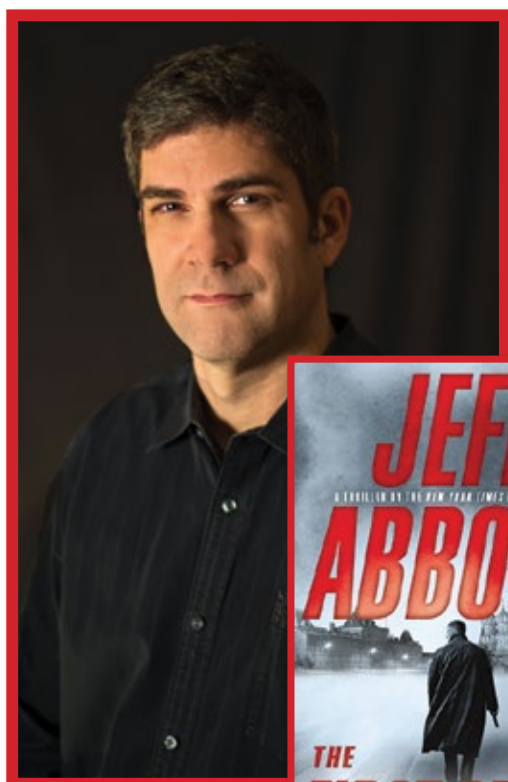
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America's Favorite Suspense Authors On the Rules of Fiction

THE PROFESSIONAL JEFF ABBOTT'S FIVE RULES

By Anthony Franze
Photo Credit: Provided by Author



In this series, author Anthony Franze interviews other suspense writers about “the rules” of writing. In this first article of 2016, Anthony talks with New York Times bestselling powerhouse, Jeff Abbott.

I still remember cracking open “Adrenaline,” the first novel in Jeff Abbott’s bestselling *Sam Capra* series. By page 15, Capra’s London CIA office explodes, his pregnant wife is kidnapped, and he’s branded a terrorist and traitor. I didn’t think Abbott could keep up that relentless pace for the rest of the book—but he did. And only an extraordinarily skilled writer could continue to build momentum five books later. Yet Abbott has done it again with “The First Order” (Grand Central, Jan. 5, 2016). This time, Abbott told me in a recent interview, “Sam Capra has to keep his brother from assassinating the Russian president.” According to *Library Journal*, the book has a massive first print run and “is being positioned as a breakout.”

None of this should come as a surprise to fans of Abbott. The Austin, Texas author has been writing acclaimed novels for more than two decades. When I asked him about his best advice to aspiring scribes, what I appreciated most about Abbott—beyond that he’s a humble and extremely likeable person—was his professional approach to the question. His rules aren’t abstract or theoretical, they’re practical—lessons learned from years of meeting deadlines



and understanding that publishing is both art and business. Here are five rules from a pro:

1. KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

"The question I'm probably asked the most about writing is whether I outline. I do." But it wasn't always that way for Abbott. "I didn't outline early on, but I learned from experience that it is much harder to cut three chapters in a manuscript than three paragraphs in an outline." Outlining, Abbott said, also is a good exercise because it makes the writer think hard about the placement—or even the need for—a given scene.

Unlike some authors whose outlines can run more than 100 pages, Abbott's are typically five to ten pages. "I like to know the beginning and end of the story. The middle is more negotiable." His outline also changes as he writes the book. When he's about two-thirds done with the manuscript, "I assess things and 're-outline'; my outline is a living document."

Abbott acknowledged that many writers shun the outline, and he's fine with that. All writers should do what works for them, he said. But, he added, one of the common criticisms of outlining doesn't ring true for him. "I hear some authors say outlines lock you up, constrain your story, but my response is that you can edit the outline just as you would edit the book. I like to have a general outline as a blueprint. But if I get a better idea of where the story is headed or a character starts to assert herself in new and interesting ways, I give myself permission to deviate from the plan." At bottom, Abbott thinks that those who spurn the outline really *do* use one: "I think their first draft of the manuscript *is* their outline."

2. RESEARCH JUST ENOUGH TO GET STARTED

"I have a love-hate relationship with research," Abbott said. He hates the idea of doing research, but once he starts he often gets lost in it, reading things that have nothing to do with the story, getting off-task.

So over time he's developed a "policy": "Do just enough research to get the first one-hundred pages written." Abbott said this has many benefits. First, it prevents the use of research to procrastinate. A lot of aspiring writers get so caught up in research, he said, they never finish—or even start—the book. Second, his policy prevents wasting time on unnecessary research. "You often don't know what you will need until you're deeper into the manuscript." Abbott does just enough to get himself started, and takes notes along the way of things he needs to look up or possible areas to explore.

That's not to say that he uses everything he researches. Abbott said the writer must be selective to avoid the dreaded information dump. "For 'The First Order,' I read way more about Russian history and politics than I could ever use—it is probably one of my most research-intensive books. But I still ended up cutting two subplots with some interesting research to tighten the pace of the story."

3. FINISH THAT FIRST DRAFT—GET IT DONE!

"I believe in writing somewhat quickly, getting the story down; it can be bad, it can be a mess, but the key thing is to get it down." Abbott said that many new writers spend too much time perfecting the beginning of their manuscripts and never end up finishing. His advice is to power through; don't stop until there is a complete first draft.

His reasons are simple: you can't edit a blank page, and the work is meaningless if you don't make it to the end. "I'm sympathetic with new writers who focus so much on the beginning. That's what you show friends or beta readers to see if you are just wasting your time or if there's something there. But you won't really know until you finish the whole book."

Abbott said he is always moving forward. If he gets stuck on a scene, he moves to a later scene or to a new point-of-view



character. “I often put a note to myself ‘come back and fix’ so I keep forward momentum. I can always come back and polish or fix something later.” The common thread here, like his other rules, is efficiency. The sensibility of a career writer.

4. WRITING IS REWRITING

It’s an oft-repeated rule: *There’s no such thing as good writing, only rewriting*. Abbott said it seems obvious enough, but where he thinks some new writers go astray is with their idea of what “rewriting” means. “Many think rewriting is just going back over the first draft with a light hand, fixing some punctuation, correcting passive voice, and giving the manuscript a quick polish. That’s not rewriting.” Rewriting, Abbott said, is going back and looking at everything—prose, structure, pacing, scene balance—everything. “Finishing the first draft is just the beginning of the work. I look to whether scenes can be combined, whether a ‘talkie’ scene could be paired with an action scene for balance, whether the pacing works. I’ve cut not just a chapter, but a character if I needed to.”

Putting in this work, he said, is a “business decision.” In the competitive world of publishing—whether you’re new or established—“you can’t give anyone at the publishing house or an agent a reason to say ‘no.’” You need to deliver the best product you can, and that means working over that draft until you can no longer stand to read it.

5. REMEMBER YOUR MOST RELUCTANT READER

Abbott said that after more than twenty years as an author he has readers who will follow him from book to book. There’s also an established reader base for thriller and suspense novels. But to make it as an author, he said, you have to continue to bring in new readers. Thus, when he writes, he’s thinking not just of his fans or thriller lovers, but those readers who would never imagine reading popular fiction. He tries to write a book so good that the most reluctant reader would be pulled into the story.

“The best letter I ever got as an author was from a nineteen-year-old who was working on an oil rig in the North Sea. He wrote that the satellite TV went out on the rig, he’d watched all the DVDs available, and finished all the video games, and somebody had left a copy of my novel, ‘Panic,’ in the mess hall.” With absolutely no other means of entertainment, the man decided to give the novel a try. “He said he’d never read a book for pleasure—reading had always been a chore for school—and he didn’t know books like this existed. After he read my book, he said he asked his ‘mum’ to get him my other books for Christmas. I treasure this note. Someone far away who didn’t see any value in reading, and my novel reached him. He discovered the pleasure of a good book.” So many readers have discovered that pleasure through Abbott’s stories, and surely more will do so from the consummate professional’s latest page-turner, “The First Order.” ■

**Anthony Franze is a lawyer in the Appellate and Supreme Court practice of a prominent Washington, D.C. law firm, and author of “The Advocate’s Daughter” (St. Martin’s Press/Minotaur, Mar. 22, 2016), a family thriller set in the insular world of the U.S. Supreme Court.*

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DRIVEN TO THE BRINK:

My Take on Emotionally Driven Characters

By Vincent Zandri

Photo Credit: Provided by Author



Here at *Suspense Magazine* we add a column or two every year, and this year is no different. We decided that it would be cool to pull back the cover of a book and look inside, sort of taking apart an engine and seeing how it works. We call this new section “Craft Corner.” We have partnered up with the ITW (International Thriller Writers) and *The Big Thrill* magazine to bring you the very best authors talking about writing, but in a unique way.

In each issue you will be introduced to two authors, many you probably already know, who have been asked a very specific question about writing. This could include, “How do you write such a scary villain?” or “What does it take to create a fictional town?” We wanted you, the fan, to get a look under the hood and see what it really takes to create such fascinating stories.

This month we have two outstanding authors who each have a very unique writing style: Vincent Zandri and Darynda Jones. Vincent’s book “Moonlight Weeps” won for best original paperback at the 2015 ThrillerFest conference, and Darynda’s *Charley Davidson* series has put her on the *NY Times* and *USA Today* bestseller lists. While it’s no secret they each know how to write a great story, these authors also share how hard work and lots of imagination are essential in the creation of a bestselling book.

We begin with the very entertaining take on emotionally driven characters by Vincent Zandri.

Mr. John Raab, Publisher, *Suspense Magazine*, to Mr. Vincent Zandri, Noir and Suspense Writer:

“Mr. Zandri, how do you write an emotionally driven character and why is it important?”

What the fuck kind of question is that?

First of all, there’s no formula or methodology or academic thesis involved in creating something so elementary yet so integral to the life of a thriller novel as emotion, that’s almost like asking how you go about alchemizing human blood from tap water. Then, to follow up with why it’s so important, is like asking why oxygen is necessary for life support (if you’ll allow me to stretch the human biology analogy even further).

Okay, I’m messing around here at the expense of my good friend John Raab. But I get a little over-the-top passionate when it comes to discussing the emotive part of the writing craft (tongue in cheek). This probably stems from my two-year tenure at Vermont College earning my coveted MFA in Writing back in the mid-1990s, when emotional character and characterization was frowned upon because it might be construed as, ummmm, entertainment (that nasty ‘E’ word). Back in those days, when Slick Willy was President and you didn’t have to get naked to pass through airport security, mandated reading involved books

"If you're not sweating bullets when you're writing a thriller novel, then you're not writing a thriller."

like John Hawkes' "The Lime Twig" and Dennis MacFarland's, "The Music Room," both reads brilliantly written in academic terms, but better than Ambien for the chronically sleepless.

Okay, so what did David Foster Wallace who hanged himself to Lana Del Rey's "Born to Die" attest about the modern literary novel and the contemporary reader? Sometimes you gotta work a little when you read, bitch.

Bullshit.

I mean, God rest his soul and all, but saying his stuff doesn't make my putter rise is putting it lightly. Yeah, yeah, the academic, *New York Times*, read-the-Sunday-edition-in-bed-over-numerous-cups-of-too-expensive-coffee are going to turn their snooty noses up at me. Maybe even call me (Gulp!) crass. But chances are they aren't reading *Suspense Magazine* anyway and, for certain, the poor hungover bastards they pay to walk their dogs on the Park Avenue sidewalk are far more likely to enjoy a good piece of skin splitting, knife plunging, blood spattering pulp. You know, a novel that boasts characters with real life and death in them. Real excitement and feeling. Why work hard when you wanna have fun?

So back to emotion and Mr. Raab's query.

Here's what it comes down to. If you're not sweating bullets when you're writing a thriller novel, then you're not writing a thriller. Get it? Too simplistic an assessment? Listen, suspense thrillers are all about the emotion, the panic, the lust, the hatred, the jealousy, the anger, the lonesomeness, the vengeance, the murderous tendencies, the suicidal tendencies, the pathological mania, the need to throw all caution to the wind and jump off that edge of that Hoover Dam into the rushing white water below just because the cops have wrongly accused you of taking a hammer to your wife's beautiful face.

It's not necessarily about how to come up with emotionally driven characters so much as it's about placing ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, and doing so quickly in the first couple of paragraphs of your novel or short story so that the average reader perusing the free sample portion of a Kindle book, while enjoying their morning constitutional, will feel like he or she absolutely positively must have this book. After all, chances are their lives are all about the work, TV, bed, and the emotional part of their lives pulled an Elvis and left the building a long time ago.

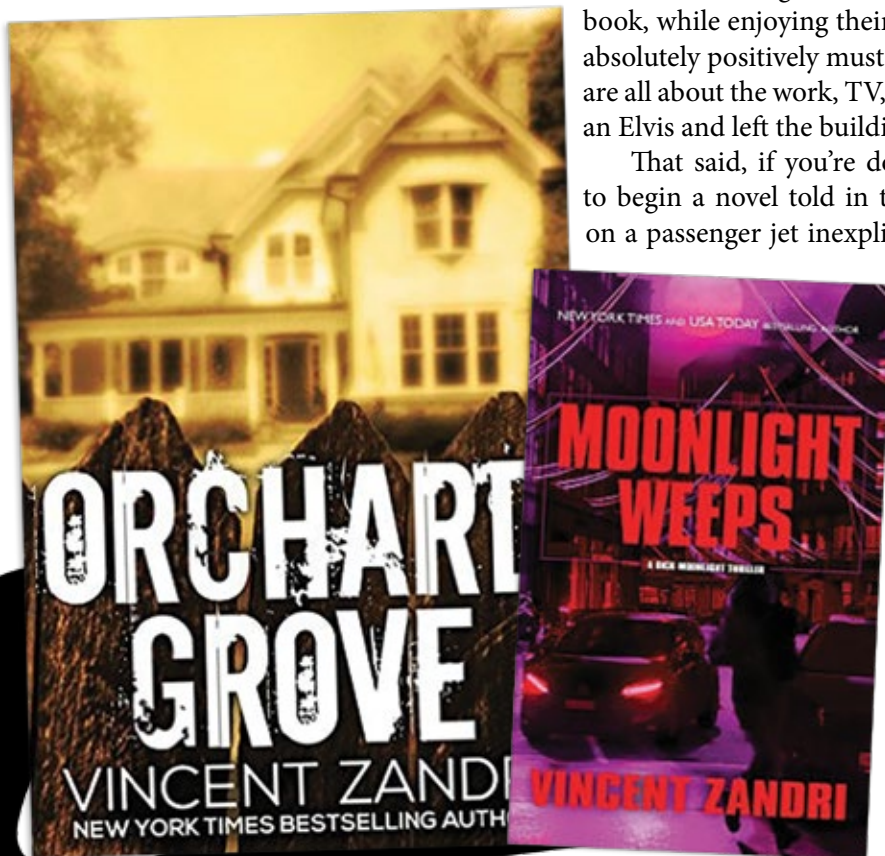
That said, if you're doing your job as a writer, perhaps you choose to begin a novel told in the first person present as soon as the engines on a passenger jet inexplicably shut off at thirty-five thousand feet. And

bored-to-death reader, if you are doing your job, you're going to want to see what happens to our dear narrator next. Now that's a novel that's going to sell. In theory at least. Why? Because it's entertaining (of course, Mr. Foster Wallace, God rest his soul, is still kicking my ass in sales, posthumously...so what the hell do I know?).

So then, that covers the importance of writing emotionally driven characters, but it still seems I'm avoiding the "how to" portion of our program.

Hmmmm, let me think.

I've always been drawn to emotional stories. Stories that scream bloody murder instead of vying for the understated. Allow me to indulge for a moment. When I was a kid, and



I mean a little kid of five or six years old, I spent a lot of time reading the Bible. But not the whole thing. I would skip to the good parts. For instance, I was fascinated with the passion play in the New Testament. I've probably read the Gospels (especially John) that deal with Christ's crucifixion, starting at the Last Supper and Judas's betrayal all the way through to the Resurrection, a thousand times. My mother would read the crucifixion passages while I was enjoying a lunch of bologna sandwiches on Wonder Bread; maybe Twinkies for desert. My fascination had little to do with religion (although the occult nature of the Bible would come to play a major role later on in my *Chase Baker* action/adventure pulp series, especially my unbelievably stupendous, brilliantly conceived and executed novel, "[The Shroud Key](#)"), but instead the drama of it all.

Jesus was an emotional, heroic character. He knew he was going to withstand some of the most agonizing torture in the world, and yet He fully accepted his fate and went through with it anyway. I mean, that's an emotional character. When Mel Gibson filmed *The Passion of the Christ* ten years ago, I truly felt scooped. I'd always wanted to tell that same exact story in novel form, just because it's so compelling, and so full of raw emotion. It's the bitchin' part of the Bible.

But I digress and I owe Mr. Raab at least a semblance of a *how to*. So here goes. If I had to come up with a way to write an emotional character, I would suggest the following (and before anyone starts tossing empty beer cans at my head, this is not meant to be an exhaustive or even accurately presented list).

1. Start with your protagonist. He or she or it, must be dealt a very difficult situation, be it the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a life, the world as we know it, a kidnapping, a house burning down all around him, a death sentence, a firing...the list of possible plots goes on and on.
2. The character must face insurmountable odds at improving his situation, or at the very least, defusing the situation. In the book I'm working on now, "The Detonator," my protagonist finds himself having to defuse a series of nano-thermite bombs that have been planted all over Albany. How is it possible not to interject heightened emotion into his every action, movement, dialogue, thoughts, remembrances, flashbacks?
3. The character must be willing to face the problem head on in order to right a great wrong, even if it means he's willing to kill some of the bad guys who get in his way. My *Jack Marconi* and *Dick Moonlight PI* series novels utilize this theme over and over again, and it makes for a very a passionate protagonist as well as the characters who surround him, especially the antagonist(s). These are characters who are not only put to the test physically, but again, emotionally as well.
4. The character must not be one dimensional. He should be hardnosed but sensitive. He must be willing to love (or hate) without condition, possess a high moral standard and be willing to look failure and/or loss in the face, and still be able to move on with his life. (Even noir antiheros possess a degree of morality, even if that morality is twisted inside out...I.E. There's no doubt in my mind Jeffrey Dahmer possessed a keen sense of right and wrong when it came to the proper methodology behind abducting, incapacitating, torturing, and eventually consuming his victims).
5. Above all, the character must be interesting. That means giving his or her life story a richness and a unique quality that other flat characters don't possess. If Robert Parker's Spenser was depicted as a ninety-pound weakling incapable of love and lacking in moral conviction, it probably wouldn't have worked. That sort of thing.

Naturally, someone is going to read this and say, "Hey, what about making an emotionally driven character do this or that, or possess A, B, or C?" And that's fine. I'm just giving you my two cents on the subject (Please address all critical commentary to Mr. Raab). In essence, for your characters to be emotionally driven to the extent that they not only make you work up a sweat, but they actually cause the pages (or Kindle screen) to heat up in your hands, you have to dig deep down into your soul of souls, and write the most authentic emotionally driven story possible. And then do it over and over and over again. For your characters, their very essence must be a matter of life or death. And trust me on this one, your readers (if you wish to keep them) won't have it any other way.

For more information on the ITW please visit: www.thrillerwriters.org. To subscribe to *The Big Thrill* newsletter please visit: www.thebigthrill.org. ■

Vincent Zandri is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of "[The Remains](#)" and "[Orchard Grove](#)." His novel "[Moonlight Weeps](#)" won the 2015 ITW Thriller Award and the 2015 PWA Shamus Award. You can sign up for his "For Your Eyes Only Newsletter" and purchase his books at WWW.VINCENTZANDRI.COM.



HOW TO CREATE THE PERFECT VILLAIN

By Darynda Jones

Photo Credit: Provided by Author



First, when creating any character, you need to patch together a few corpses then strap your arts-and-crafts project to a metal gurney and figure out how to channel lightning.

Just kidding!

It's pretty easy to spot the villain in a story. He has a handlebar mustache, and he twirls its curly ends with both hands. Simultaneously!

Okay, just kidding again. By today's standards, mustache guy would make a horrible villain, unless you were to give him a unique reason for that mustache. Perhaps he wears it in homage to his father who was gunned down by your hero's father, a man upon whom your villain has sworn revenge. It's up to your hero to figure out what is going on and save his father, a retired sheriff, before the villain completes his mission. See what I did there? Added depth.

If nothing else, your villain should be as complex a character as your hero. In some cases even more so. I remember reading a book by Karen Rose and being completely floored at the depth and dimension she gave her female villain. She was just as captivating as the heroine. And THAT makes great storytelling.

There are several ways of making sure you have a fantastic, unforgettable villain.

THE RIGHT FIT: First, make sure your villain is right for your hero. Can she truly cripple your hero physically, financially, or emotionally? Is he a good opponent? Is she capable of keeping your hero from his goals? Have others in your hero's circle gone up against your villain and paid dearly for it? We need

to know exactly what your villain is capable of. How far he will go to thwart the hero.

MOTIVE: Just like in the example above, you can't simply give the reader a mustache-twirling villain with no depth and hope for the best. He needs a reason for trying to shove the hero off a twelve-story balcony. She needs a motive for showing compromising photos of your heroine and their very married boss at the office Christmas party. (And, yes, it was all completely innocent. Your heroine can explain!) Or maybe your villain killed everyone in her sorority in her college days. Why?

The more the writer shows motivation and depth, the more the reader will fall into your story. You will hook your reader with a villain who killed everyone in her sorority for a really good reason, as opposed to just showing the dreadful deed with no explanation. (Note: It doesn't have to be a sane reason, just a good one in your villain's eyes.)

PERSONALITY: The same applies to your villain's personality. Is he funny? Is she creepy? Is he sleazy and gag-inducing or sad and strangely sympathetic? Maybe she's a sociopath and was just born "bad." Or perhaps he grew up an orphan and went

“If nothing else, your villain should be as complex a character as your hero.”

from foster home to foster home, each one a little worse than the prior. Creating empathy for the villain can only strengthen your story. He still has to be brought down, but we love it when the writer can get us to like the villain. Or at least care about what happens to her.

PURPOSE: What is your villain's true purpose? Is she merely an obstacle for the heroine? Does he represent the struggle your hero is facing in his professional life? Or does the battle with the villain represent the war your heroine is having in her personal life?

One of the greatest villains in recent history, IMHO, is from “Gone Girl.” (SPOILERS AHEAD!) As much as we grew to hate Amy (although let's face it, we didn't much like the selfish, cheating Nick either), when she was about to be robbed by that couple at the cabins, we rooted for her. We actually rooted for her.

WHY?

We hated her! We really, really did, and yet we hated the couple just a little bit more. Flynn ingeniously made us feel sympathy for her villain in that moment, and she made us question throughout most of the book who the villain really was. Hats off to her. Stellar writing there.

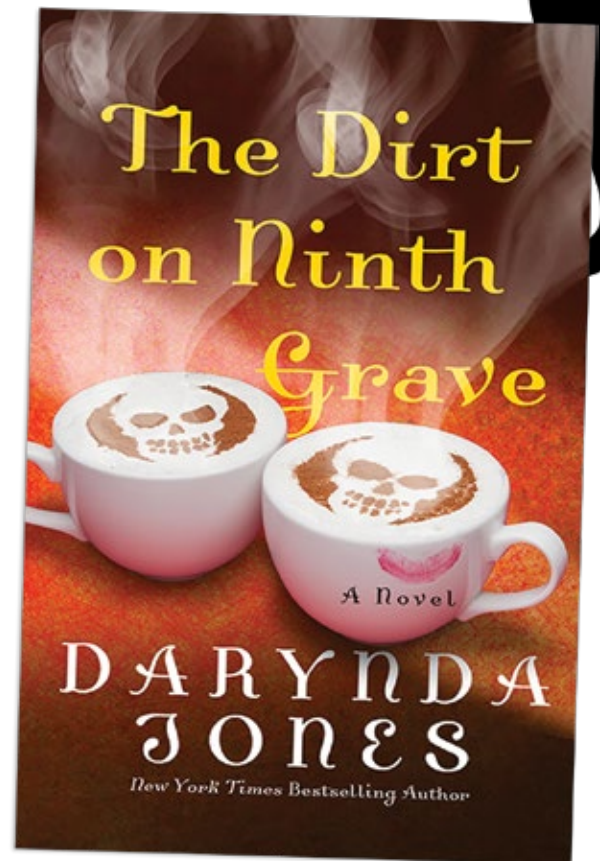
In the *Charley Davidson* series, I get to come up with all kinds of awesome motivations for my villains. The world is both contemporary and paranormal, so my villains can be your everyday serial killer or an evil demon from a hell dimension. I made my heroine a PI in the tangible world, but she's also the Grim Reaper in the supernatural one, and she solves mysteries for both the living and the dead. It's like a gold mine of villainous possibilities and I reap the benefits of those milder frenemy-type villains and the ones that are evil to the very depths of their souls. I have layers and layers of bad people!

Either way, if your villain is an evil president who forces children to fight to the death on live TV or a scorned wife out to get revenge on her cheating husband by faking her own death and making sure her husband is charged with the murder, the violation has to fit the motivation. Make sure your villain moves the story forward, has his or her own arc, and suits the story you are telling. A jealous ex will fit much better in a romantic comedy than an axe-wielding serial killer will, but to each his own.

Best of luck with your evil villain!

For more information on the ITW please visit: www.thrillerwriters.org. To subscribe to *The Big Thrill* newsletter please visit: www.thebigthrill.org. ■

NY Times and USA Today Bestselling Author Darynda Jones has won numerous awards for her work, including a prestigious Golden Heart, a Rebecca, two Hold Medallions, a RITA, and a Daphne du Maurier, and she has received stellar reviews from dozens of publications including, starred reviews from *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and the *Library Journal*. As a born storyteller, Darynda grew up spinning tales of dashing damsels and heroes in distress for any unfortunate soul who happened by, annoying man and beast alike, and she is ever so grateful for the opportunity to carry on that tradition. She currently has two series with St. Martin's Press: *The Charley Davidson Series* and *the Darklight Trilogy*. She lives in the Land of Enchantment, also known as New Mexico, with her husband of almost 30 years, and two beautiful sons, the Mighty, Mighty Jones Boys. She can be found at www.daryndajones.com.



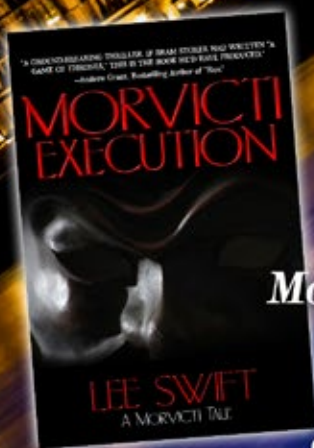
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THIS ISN'T TV; THIS IS REAL

D.P. LYLE UPDATES “FORENSICS FOR DUMMIES”

Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
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When an author puts science and forensics in their book, the reader has to wonder if what they write is real or coming from the TV show CSI. Unfortunately, many authors simply don't know what is right or wrong, so they make it up or use what they have seen on TV or in other books. This is very dangerous.

However, we have the solution. Author D.P. Lyle has finally updated the very popular “Forensics for Dummies” book that he first wrote in 2004. Since that time, D.P. has written six more books on the subject, helping authors and readers understand what really happens when a body is burned in a bonfire, or that exotic poison that can't be seen in autopsy.

Since 2013, D.P. and Jan Burke have been hosting a show on Suspense Radio called, Crime and Science Radio, where they bring on experts from their field to talk war stories on a variety of topics. *Suspense Magazine* has published several articles from D.P. discussing forensics and his fiction writing. This is the first time we have interviewed him strictly on the subject, so you guys are in for a treat. Normally we give you a sneak peek inside the author's latest release, but where do you start with a book packed full of so much information?

Below you will see the exclusive interview we had with D.P. After that, make sure you check out his website at www.dplylemd.com for more information on his writing, and www.crimeandsciencerradio.com for more on the radio show.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): Why do TV and thriller novels continue to get the science wrong?

Doug Lyle (D.L.): *There are several reasons for this, I believe. Sometimes writers are just lazy and don't want to do the research. Or they assume they know the correct answer. I mean, TV shows are replete with erroneous forensic science and most people get their science education that way. The news is often not much better in that print and TV reporters aren't all that well-versed in forensic science either and make similar mistakes. Another reason is that novels, and particularly Hollywood productions, are all about entertainment, and in this regard, story will often trump science. The science may be too complex or not fit the plot line they have in mind and so they change it or simply glide over it to get their 42 minutes of screen time for an hour show.*

S. MAG.: What are the most common mistakes writers make regarding forensics?

D.L.: *There are several that I see commonly. Most glaring is perhaps the time of death where the writer needs to pin point an exact time for their plot. The coroner or medical examiner will say something like, “He died at 10:30 PM last evening.” In truth, none of the methods for determining time of death are very accurate and they always yield a “best guess” range. A more accurate appraisal would be that the victim died somewhere in a four-hour window the evening before.*

Another area is the seeming infallibility of the evidence. As if a certain piece of evidence absolutely proves that a certain

individual committed the crime. It's not really that clear cut. At the end of the day, evidence most often connects a person to another person, place, or object. For example, if a suspect's blood is found at a crime scene that is not absolute proof that he committed the crime, only that he shed blood at the crime scene. There might be an innocent explanation. Or not. He might indeed be guilty. Or not. Or perhaps carpet fibers found on a corpse are consistent with those in the trunk of a suspect's car. The operative words here are "consistent with." Not absolute proof, but rather a suggestion.

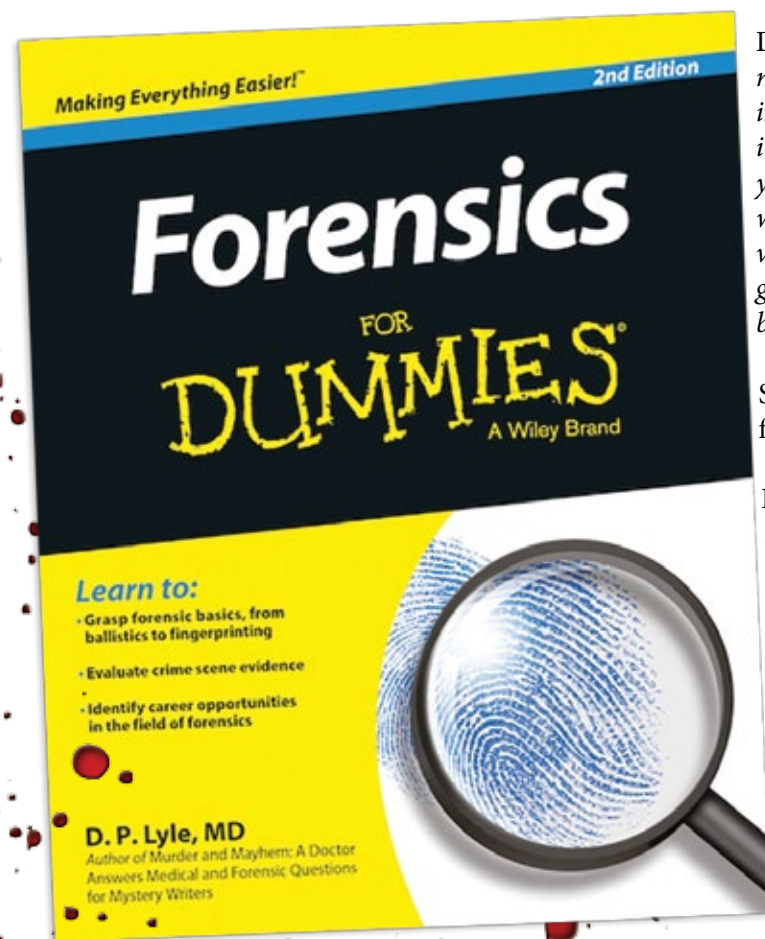
S. MAG.: Are there simple things a writer can do to insure the details are correct?

D.L.: There are actually many resources available. Many writers consult me and I try to give them the best answer I can to help them with her story. But there are many other resources. The Internet is replete with information. But there is a big caveat here. I always tell people that any moron with a modem can put anything they want on the Internet, but that doesn't make it true. So always check and double check and, most importantly, consider the source. Reputable scientists and organizations in the field often have articles online and websites that contain information that is typically accurate and useful. Also, don't be afraid to contact these individuals. Regardless of how many initials they have after their names, most people like to talk about what they know. Give them a chance. Be polite, be prepared, and don't waste their time, but let them know that you are a fiction writer and you need some information for your story. Most people will go out of their way to help you. Never underestimate the power of the word "writer."

S. MAG.: What are the most important elements for someone wanting to write about this field?

D.L.: I think the best advice I can give is that writers should remember that the story is not about the science. Even in very high concept stories, such as "Jurassic Park," where the science was very cool and clearly an integral part of the story, in the end the story was about the people. Writers should keep that in mind. It's not about the science but rather about how the science affects the characters. That's crucial in storytelling because storytelling is about people and conflict. Textbooks are about science.

S. MAG.: What prompted you to finally update your classic original book?



D.L.: "Forensics For Dummies" has been a very successful member of the For Dummies series for Wiley Publishing. It is in many countries and has gone through many printings since it was first released in 2005. We looked at doing an update five years ago but at that time not a great deal had changed in the world of forensic science; but now, 10 years after the original version, many things have changed. It seemed that now was a good time for an update so we decided to press forward. It will be released February 23, 2016.

S. MAG.: How has the science changed since you wrote the first edition?

D.L.: Several things have changed in forensic science in the last decade but none more so than in the arena of DNA. Newer DNA techniques allow for the analysis of much smaller samples, even a single cell taken from a fingerprint, the so-called touch DNA, and the newer techniques allow for more rapid DNA analysis and profiling. In addition, the areas of chemistry and toxicology have advanced a considerable amount. Lastly, the entire field of forensic science is under scrutiny because of a lack of consistency and standardization. This is critically important in that the training and requirements for specialists and the techniques used for evidence analysis must be standardized and quantified so that they are reliable and consistent across

"I ALWAYS TELL PEOPLE THAT ANY MORON WITH A MODEM CAN PUT ANYTHING THEY WANT ON THE INTERNET, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT TRUE."

all jurisdictions. This is discussed in the new edition and is critically important for the future of forensic science.

S. MAG.: Why are readers and TV watchers so fascinated with the science of forensics?

D.L.: *This is a question that has been batted around for years and my answer really hasn't changed. I think that forensic science is a combination of science, which people think is cool and love to learn about, and dirty laundry. Gossip is a powerful commodity. Just witness all the reality TV shows which are basically gossip and voyeurism. So when you marry science to dirty laundry it immediately grabs people's attention. I think that's the main reason the world's fascination with forensic science has continued for so long.*

S. MAG.: What propelled you to want to write about forensics and help writers with such a complex topic in the beginning?

D.L.: *The writing part is fairly straightforward. I like to read crime fiction, therefore, I like to write crime fiction and you can't enter that arena without knowing something about forensic science. Even if the story doesn't contain a lot of forensic science, if a crime is committed in the story then the science cannot be completely ignored, so at least a rudimentary understanding of the science is essential. I like all things science since by nature and training I am a scientist, and forensic science is a wonderfully fascinating field.*

As for helping others, I think that's also fairly straightforward. Of all the hats that I wear, and sometimes there seems to be too many, teacher is the one I love the most. There's nothing quite like seeing that light go on when someone understands what you're talking about. Add to that the fact that you never really know a subject until you can teach it and it's a natural. Also, knowledge is only useful if it is shared, so sharing what I know also seems like a natural event. And I learn from other people the same way.

S. MAG.: What future piece of tech or detection is on the horizon?

D.L.: *There are too many arenas to discuss in great detail but obviously DNA technology is continuing to progress. We are on the verge of being able to obtain a physical description and perhaps even the age of an individual simply from a DNA sample. Other research is showing methods for determining how long ago a DNA sample was left at the scene. That is, was the blood stain left on the floor a year ago or three weeks ago? This can be a critical question in many criminal investigations.*

The area of computer and electronic forensics is exploding. The things that forensic experts can do with computers, photographs, emails, voice transmissions, and the list goes on, is nothing short of astounding. It always amazes me how many criminals believe that if they go on the Internet they're anonymous. Not true.

Another arena is micro technology in the field of chemistry and toxicology. Being able to sample an environment for toxins is critically important in our current terrorism-filled world. Hand-held devices are available for finding these toxins very quickly. I only see this field growing rapidly and widely down the road.

S. MAG.: What's next for you?

D.L.: *Many things. Perhaps too many things. As I said before, the new edition of "Forensics For Dummies" will be out shortly. I also have another book coming out in July. It's the beginning of a new comedic thriller series, starring ex baseball player and reluctant PI Jake Longly. The first installment in the series is titled "Deep Six" and is set on the Gulf Coast. Jake is quirky, funny, and has an odd way of solving crimes. I'm working on the second in the series right now. In addition, Jan Burke and I are continuing with Crime and Science Radio, which as our producer you know, and we have some wonderful upcoming shows. Stay tuned.*

We'd like to thank D.P. for taking the time to sit down with us. To learn more about "Forensics For Dummies," check it out at <http://amzn.com/B01BN0QHF2>. ■

Forensic Files

By D.P. Lyle, MD

Q&A: CAN MY M.E. DETERMINE IF A CHILD DIED FROM EXPOSURE AS OPPOSED TO BEING LOCKED IN A HEATED VEHICLE?

Q: In my story, a police officer is on the scene where the body of a three-year-old child was found among the rocks and weeds of a dried up riverbed in Southern California. It is early summer. Can the CSI techs or the ME determine if the child died from being locked up in a heated car rather than from exposure to the elements where the body was found?

~Jack Dietz, Production Coordinator, Las Vegas, NV

A: The simple answer is that this is not very likely, however there might be a way. Much depends on the condition of the body. If it is severely decayed or has become skeletal, the ME would have little to work with and there would be no way to determine exactly where the death occurred. In either case, the death would be from that catchall term “exposure.” What that means is that the victim died from lack of water or food, with water of course being the most important. Exposure deaths are almost always due to severe dehydration.

However, if the child is found within a day or two of death, the body would be more or less intact and the ME might be able to estimate where the death had occurred, given the two choices you outlined. One difference would be insect activity. If the child died in the trunk as opposed to being exposed outdoors there would be less insect activity for the amount of time since death than would be expected from an exposed corpse. If the ME determined that the child had been dead for 2 or 3 days, yet there was essentially no insect activity, it would mean that she had been in a protected environment, such as an enclosed car or car trunk, for those 2 or 3 days and only exposed for maybe a few hours. On the other hand, if he found insect activity that matched his estimate of the time since death, this would favor her being in an exposed environment for those 2 or 3 days. It's not that flies can't get into car trunks, it's just that most are so well-sealed their access would be very limited, if at all.

On a similar note, predatory animals would not be able to attack the body while it was in the car, but if exposed, predator feeding on an exposed body is fairly common. Coyotes are everywhere. Predator activity would suggest a longer period of environmental exposure.

One circumstance that might be interesting for you would be if the child died in either the trunk or on the floorboard of the car. As she died from hyperthermia and dehydration, she would increasingly gasp for breath toward the end of her life and could inhale carpet fibers from the trunk lining or floor carpets. This would not happen if death occurred while exposed outside. This would of course require that the body be in fairly good condition. I think as long as you have the body found within a few days, the decay process would not have progressed far enough for the lungs to be destroyed, therefore, the ME might see these fibers during his microscopic examination of lung tissue. Once he found these fibers, he would know that the victim had inhaled them and was alive while in the car. So finding the fibers would at least allow the ME to guess that she had been in the car near or shortly before her death.

Another interesting thing about this scenario is that the ME could then analyze these fibers physically, optically, and chemically and determine the manufacturer of the carpet. This in turn could lead to the car manufacturer and even the make and model year; or at least a narrow range of years since car manufacturers change their products quite frequently. This would greatly help your police officer develop suspects. ■

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

Tilly Bagshawe

Isn't "Reckless" with Sidney Sheldon's Writing

Interview by Elise Cooper for *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



The plot of "Reckless" begins with Tracy's decision to give up everything, settle down in Colorado, and devote herself solely to raising her teenage son, Nick. But her world seems to end after she receives the tragic news of her son's death. Tracy decides to package her guilt into finding who is responsible. At the same time, she is asked by the FBI and CIA to help hunt down a notorious environmental terrorist who sent an encrypted message mentioning Tracy by name. She wonders if there is a connection and her thirst for revenge propels her to help the national security agencies bring these terrorists to justice.

Elise Cooper (E.C.): Are you the only author contracted to write Sidney Sheldon books?

Tilly Bagshawe (T.B.): Yes. *Sidney told his family and agent before his death that he would like his legacy to continue. About a year after he died, I was contacted by my agent who asked if I would like to audition for the family. I had to write some chapters in his voice and come up with some different ideas. The first Sheldon book I wrote was a sequel to "Master of the Game" entitled "Mistress of the Game."*

E.C.: Does the family ever veto something you write?

T.B.: *I would describe it as a collaboration. I am very respectful of the family's feelings because at the end of the day it is his name on it. In this book there were certain things alluded to that were cut because his widow was uncomfortable with them. She has told me in the past Sidney would not write that phrase or a scene of the plot. For example, sometimes I bring my English upbringing in by saying something in a British way.*

E.C.: Are these the only books you write?

T.B.: *I write books in my own name, set in the Swell Valley. They are humorous romantic novels, slightly soap opera in style. They don't have the thriller plot driven elements of the Sheldon books.*

E.C.: Was it hard to write a novel based on the Tracy Whitney character?

T.B.: *There was a hesitation on my part and the family's part because she is probably his most famous character. I know many fans wrote to Sidney wanting to know what happened to her since the first book, "If Tomorrow Comes," ends in a cliffhanger. Writing her character came easy, but I had to rewrite and rework the plotting. It was challenging to make the world she operates in believable, workable, and modern, since she came on the scene in 1985. I needed to find an interesting and real story for this great character, as well as to have her grow. FYI: Sidney actually put together some notes of what he would do with Tracy.*

E.C.: How would you describe Tracy?

T.B.: *She is a feminist who is brave and independent. I loved her character. When I read the first book she was in, as a young person, I felt he understood women. He wrote about strong women, putting them in interesting roles. I think she is complicated and quite real. Maybe someone you would want to be friends with.*

E.C.: It is interesting that she was a woman in a male dominated world. Do you agree?

T.B.: *Absolutely. When he conceived her in the early 1980s he wrote her as a computer expert in a bank. The fact that she was pregnant and unmarried was also edgy and racy for readers during that time period. I hope I made her adapt to a different world than she started out in. Remember, she started out in her early twenties and now is middle aged.*

E.C.: This is not a spoiler because it happens early in the plot, but I was shocked you killed off her child. Aren't animals and children off limits?

T.B.: *Sidney famously did kill off children in two books. He pulled no punches and wrote unexpected twists. I think it is truthful to his style and voice. He went where no one else would go. I do agree it is shocking and I thought twice about it. I can say it is really terrible to write. The estate does read the synopsis and the manuscript, approving everything. His widow read it pretty closely and was very involved with this book.*

E.C.: Did you kill off the child to give Tracy more latitude?

T.B.: *Yes—it was a good side effect with some of the decisions she would make. I wanted to shock the reader. It did make writing the rest of the book easier, especially a heroine who must move around internationally.*

E.C.: Would you say the themes are revenge, finding the truth, trust, and grief?

T.B.: *Trust is a theme because there is not any. She cannot trust her past lover Jeff. She is just a survivor now, taking care of herself. Revenge comes into play because she wants to blame someone for her child's death and finding out who gives her a sense of purpose. Grief is what drives Tracy. I am really*

interested in the effect this has on people's psyches.

E.C.: You have some powerful quotes in the book that deal with grief. "Human loss was not a team game. Each person dealt with tragedy differently...The need to be distracted... Don't shut it out. That only gives it more power. But don't let it consume you." Did you personally experience grief?

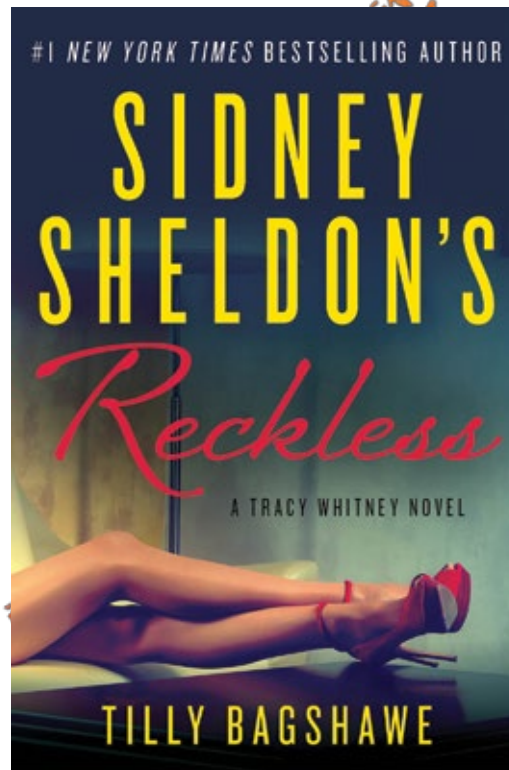
T.B.: *Not really. I am terrified of it because now in middle age I have not experienced it myself. But my husband had huge losses in his life, losing both parents when he was young. As a result he was put into foster care. I am married to someone where grief is a part of his life. I have watched others who have experienced it try to cope and survive.*

E.C.: Will the next book be a Tracy book?

T.B.: *That is an open question. I am not sure. Ultimately it will be Mrs. Sheldon's decision. I definitely think she has more stories in her. There are a lot of things we can do with other characters and plots. I feel there might be something different with the next book, but I don't think this will be the last Tracy book.*

E.C.: What do you see as your responsibility in writing the Sidney Sheldon books?

T.B.: *To try my best to stay true to his writing. With that said, I am not him so it can't be identical. There also must be considerations for the changes in the world. I want to strike a balance between his voice and mine. I feel incredibly lucky to write these books and to carry on these characters.*



We would like to thank Tilly for taking the time to speak with us. Don't forget to check out Tilly's website to keep up to date on her future releases at www.tillybagshawe.com. ■

Elise Cooper has interviewed a wide variety of bestselling authors for many years. Her book reviews and Q/A's focus on women, thrillers, crime mysteries, and national security issues. She considers books an important part of our lives and hopes these reviews/interviews will provide some insight. In addition, she has set up book tours for authors and was the Director of Author Relations for the 2014 Veteran's Benefit Book Fair held in San Diego.

GEHENNA DIVISION: CASE #609

By Sandra R. Campbell

For the last two days, the body of his sister had dangled beside the bed. Long tendrils of ghostly hair swirled around her head and reached down to tickle his bare arm.

Zared Wayward stared past her at the paint-chipped wall. He couldn't bring himself to turn off the bedside lamp. After days of sleep deprivation, his dreams were playing out in the furnished space of his bedroom. He couldn't switch-off his visions any longer...Madeline's death was no suicide.

Swinging his legs to the floor, Zared pushed the imaginary body of his sister aside and grabbed the manila folder he'd left on the nightstand. The file labeled *Gehenna Division: Case #609*, shook in his hands. Three years of his life was a small price to pay for the sanctity of a loved one's soul.

So, why was he still holding the file?

Gehenna was a last resort, the only option Zared had left. He would go deep undercover with the new division under the charge of Ezra Knight, the most intimidating person Zared had ever met. Ezra was twice the size of the average man, and his rust colored horns, etched with bright blue markings, towered over an oblong crown of black hair. His pasty skin stretched tightly over each sharp feature. Almost every visible inch of him had some sort of piercing or elaborate tattoo. But the most disturbing thing about Ezra's demonic look were his black pupils rimmed in fire. Eye tattoos weren't uncommon, but Zared had never seen one with a living, moving flame.

No one in the division knew what Ezra had looked like before the body modifications. Then again, Ezra was a "lifer." Zared, however, could come back. He'd be normal again. What's a few extra surgeries? Whatever they change, they will change back.

A cold hand rested on his shoulder and the smell of Madeline's perfume wafted under his nose as Zared opened the folder. The contract's details sprawled over twenty pages. He glanced over at his sister, the rope still tight around her neck. The scent of her perfume grew rancid. Sulfur assaulted his senses as her grey lips twisted and opened in a silent scream. Her soul was being tortured in Hell and here he was pondering the fine print. As soon as he scrawled his signature across the dotted line, Madeline's ghost vanished.

I'm going to Hell.

Zared leaned across the stainless steel sink only to rear back in disgust. The reflection in the mirror wasn't a face he recognized—or wanted—but it was the visage he needed for the job. Vanity be damned! Madeline meant more to him than his college-boy good looks. The only identifying mark that remained was the small tattoo on his left shoulder, a dedication to their parents after the accident—Madeline had the same one. Zared prayed it would be enough.

"How's it going in there?" The voice on the other side of the door was like a cracking iceberg and held an otherworldly edge. "You're not crying, are you?"

"No, sir," Zared shouted over his shoulder, still unable to take his eyes off the atrocity before him. His trembling hand fluttered over the subdermal implants that ran along the center of his bare skull. Two weeks ago the head that now had three protruding shark fins was bump-free, and covered with silky brown hair. His square masculine jaw had been extended and given a sharp point, his tongue split, and his skin decorated in graphic tattoos and oddly placed piercings. Anger curled his fingers into a tight ball, knuckles turning white from the strain as he slammed his fist into the mirror. The cracks that splintered across the glass only accentuated the monstrosity he'd become, that he had agreed to become to save Madeline's soul.

A gnarled hand opened the bathroom door and tossed a bundle on the floor behind him. "Put these on." Jagged nails scratched the wood as the grisly hand slid the door closed again.

Zared stared at the pile of clothes at his feet. Once the uniform was on, there was no going back. But then, he reminded himself, there was no going back after the hours of painful surgery and recovery he'd undergone. He was a demon now, at least on the outside—one of the Gehenna, an elite law enforcement team transformed and trained to survive the rigors of Hell.

Now, with just over a month of special ops training, he was going into the field. Zared had one arm in the heavy fire-retardant jacket when the bathroom door flew open.

"What's taking so damn long?" Ezra fumed as he stalked to the toilet. He shot Zared a burning glare as he reached for his fly, and then paused. "What did you do?"

Zared looked down at his clothes, the jacket drooping off one shoulder as he lifted his arms to inspect the uniform. "What?"

The floorboards groaned under Ezra's steel-tipped boots as if he'd suddenly gained a hundred pounds. "Where's Uvall's brand? I clearly stated upper right shoulder."

Unable to handle Ezra's heated stare, Zared slid the rest of the way into the jacket. He mumbled. "It's on my left shoulder."

The geyser of piss that battered the shallow porcelain bowl was almost as threatening as Ezra's raised fist. "Left shoulder! Shit for brains, are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I couldn't cover up my tattoo. Madeline won't believe me without it." Zared bowed his head. He'd purposely broken protocol for the sake of getting Madeline out of Hell as fast as possible. With the tattoo, he wouldn't have to waste time convincing her of his identity. One look and she'd know without a doubt, but it was a high-stakes gamble to shift the brand. At the time he thought it would pay off.

"So, you're willing to risk her soul, your life, and possibly mine, all for the sake of a crappy memorial honoring a couple of belligerent drunks? Z, I thought you were sharper than that."

The Waywards might have been deadbeats and their family dysfunctional, but they were all Zared and Madeline had, though not for very long. Zared drilled his superior with a hard look that would have been terrifying had he been a real demon. But for someone like Ezra, Zared's weakness was disgustingly transparent.

Zared took a deep breath and unclenched his fists. He was already on thin ice, and he knew that at no point could he risk losing his cool with Ezra. "I'll keep my arms covered."

"Yeah." Ezra zipped his pants and stabbed the flusher with a single knuckle. "What happens if you screw up down there and someone demands to see your credentials? You can't show them your left shoulder. Even the lowest demon is smarter than that."

The Gates of Hell stretched beyond the misty clouds that hovered far above Zared's head. There was no visible end to the thick towering poles made of shimmering maroon and black scales—the skin of the beast. Lucifer's scales were said to be tougher than iron, impervious to fire, and impenetrable to all weaponry. The gates were a fortress that only an idiot would enter willingly, Zared told himself, even as he stepped closer and placed his hand on the rough, scaled post. He immediately pulled away as small yellowish blisters sprouted painfully along his palm.

"Put your gloves on," Ezra barked with a shake of his head. He then turned to dismiss the SWAT team.

Peering inside the gates, Zared noted the narrow stone path lined by high oak trees. A rather peaceful looking trail led down a steep slope his human eyes could not follow.

"Where's the staircase?" Zared asked as he pulled on a pair of leather gloves, still keeping a watchful eye on the picturesque scenery of the Netherworld. "I heard it was here, too."

Ezra, gazing through the gates, drew up beside him. The flames surrounding his black irises flickered. "Heaven's entrance is directly behind you."

Zared whipped around. Surely Ezra was playing some sort of joke on him. After all, the staircase to Heaven was supposed to be absolute perfection—single floating steps of pristine marble winding brilliantly into a clear, blue paradise. Such a sight could not be missed, but when Zared turned around the only thing he saw was a pile of crumbled stones in front of a suspended wall of dead vines.

"They deactivated the staircase a year ago."

Zared walked over and brushed his gloved hand over the brittle vines. He watched the small particles float to the ground. "How is that possible?"

"Heaven's an elitist club, now. Unless you're one of the few who have dedicated your life to the church or become disgustingly wealthy to buy a get-out-of-jail-free card, there's no admission."

Zared considered Ezra's words. If what he said was true, Madeline would never get into Heaven. She was innocent of the suicide that landed her soul in Hell, but she'd never been pristine. She had a rough time after their parent's car accident and might have slept around a little, perhaps even developed a few addictive vices, but none of that made her horrible or evil.

Zared rolled his shoulders and spoke through gritted teeth. "Why didn't you tell me...before?"

A slow grin lifted the edges of Ezra's black tinged lips. "Why, Z? Would you have chosen differently if I had?"

"Of course!" Zared said, biting down on the right side of his newly forked tongue. "I can't get her out."

"You can move her from the Seventh Circle and into Limbo," Ezra growled. "Madeline doesn't have to suffer for eternity. Instead, she can reside in a pleasant time and place. That's the best any soul can ask for now-a-days, to end up in the *First Circle of Hell*."

"Why haven't people been informed?" Zared asked, turning around to face his superior.

Ezra gave a shrug of his massive shoulders, then tipped his horns in Hell's direction. "You ready to go?"

The crack of the duo's boot heels echoed on the stone path that led through a forest, down a steep hill, and into a quaint town. The buildings, streets, and outlying area looked like any small town in rural America. The people milling about the streets, in various periods of dress that marked their time of death, greeted them with downcast eyes as they hurried about their daily business.

This is where Madeline will end up.

Zared took a hard look around. He heard no screams of torture, witnessed no flesh being torn from bone, and he decided it would be enough.

"Over there. That's where we have to go," Ezra said, pointing to the solitary house at the end of Main Street. The red painted sign hanging out front read "Mayor's Office."

The double doors to the mayor's office swung open before the pair reached the front steps. A rich voice bellowed from the dark interior. "Come in, Mr. Knight."

A rolling shiver traveled down Zared's spine as he climbed the wooden stairs and stepped into an empty foyer. The plush carpet beneath his feet swallowed the sound of

his entrance. He followed Ezra across the room to a single door, a knocker in the shape of a fist its only adornment. It should have taken six or seven steps to reach the door on the other side of the room, but after five minutes they remained several steps away, not having moved an inch closer.

Ezra stopped and threw his hand up, signaling Zared to halt. "What's with the games, Neville?"

"Who's that with you?" the disembodied voice rang out. Zared felt the heat of scrutiny even though no one else was in the room with them. "I've not seen this one before."

"He's moving up the ranks. Meet Z."

The fist-shaped knocker on the door moved, a bony finger unfolding to point at Zared. "What's your name, demon?"

Zared stifled his immediate response with a grunt. Lower cast demons did not reveal their true identities. In Hell, names had meaning; names held great power.

"Everyone calls me Z. You should do the same."

The door-knocker's middle finger shot upward and, to ensure the intended insult was seen, stilled for a moment and then curled repeatedly, beckoning the pair to enter.

Ezra reached the door first, but he moved aside for Zared. Steeling his nerves with a deep breath, Zared opened the door and stepped into a great hall that far exceeded the size of the house they had entered. A floral pattern with blooms the color of coal covered each blood-red wall. The floor under his feet shone like a floating oil spill—fluid liquid movement. Above him, a glass roof displayed a night sky, even though they had arrived in the middle of the day.

In the center of the vast open space sat a simply constructed wooden desk. Behind it a plump figure with horns and cloven feet waited. He wore royal garb, an elaborate coat decorated with gemmed cuffs. Atop the desk, to the plump figure's right, was a bloodstained dagger. As Zared and Ezra approached, the demon slipped a hand beneath his jeweled collar and fingered a red and black beaded necklace.

"Why do I have the pleasure of a visit from the Gehenna?" Zared noted the demon, Neville, spoke without a single inflection in his voice.

"There's been an infraction in the Seventh," Ezra answered.

Neville pulled the beaded necklace over his bottom lip and slid it back and forth through his partially open mouth. "You don't say. And what would that be, exactly?"

A moment of silence passed. Ezra nudged Zared's elbow, but he couldn't find the words to answer while his gaze was transfixed on the demon's necklace. Drops of milky saliva stuck to the red beads but not to the black ones.

"The Harpies pilfered a soul into perdition before the case could be brought before the Council," Ezra said with a growl.

"You have proof that this soul was unjustly sentenced?" Boredom oozed from Neville's pores, but he sat up straighter in his chair.

"I do," Zared said, finally coming to his senses. He pulled case file #609 from inside his jacket, opened the file to the autopsy report, and tossed it on the demon's desk.

Zared knew the report by heart. The autopsy had proven

that Madeline's first vertebra was not dislocated, which usually happened in a suicide by hanging. It also stated that postmortem lividity was found in the buttocks of the body and not in the lower limbs, which indicated Madeline was not dangling. She also had several bruises and scratches—common defense wounds—on her hands, arms, and legs.

"Whoever did this to Madeline Wayward did it against her will. And those damn harpies know it," Zared said through clenched teeth.

Neville glanced up from the report, a single brow raised in doubt. "Says here she was a heroin addict. In fact, Ms. Madeline Wayward has many infractions on her record."

Ezra marched up to the desk, the tips of his boots thumping against the wood. "I never said her soul was clean, but her fate is not in the Seventh. We're moving her here."

A groan sounded as Neville leaned back in his chair. "Fine. You have my permission to enter. Travel swiftly and don't get caught. I will not suffer Lucifer's wrath for a weak soul and a pair of meddling humans."

Zared ground his teeth to keep from shouting. Ezra had failed to mention that Neville, or anyone, was aware of the undercover work they were doing. Their fate was in the hands of a demon! Red sparks impeded his vision, and Zared stumbled as he turned to leave, drawing a sideways glance from Ezra.

The fantasy of Zared ramming his fist through the center of Ezra's repulsive face kept repeating and quickly spiraled until Zared could hold his tongue no longer, "What the fuck was that?"

Ezra stilled and then turned like a Halloween mannequin on a display wheel. "What?"

"They know!" Zared spat. "Hell knows about the Gehenna Division."

Bending forward, Ezra flared his nostrils and looked like a bull ready to charge. "Of course they do. It's Hell. Do we have a problem here?"

Zared moved a step back. "Jesus, man! What else haven't you told me?"

Each vertebrae of Ezra's spine snapped as he straightened into his full, seven-foot frame.

A hush settled over them for a long moment. Finally Zared said, "You failed to mention the closure of Heaven's staircase."

"And?" Ezra said, moving on.

Watching Ezra march toward the door with little regard for his distress only made Zared panic more. He grabbed hold of Ezra's bicep and growled under his breath. "And now I find out that we're not really undercover, that Hell has full knowledge of our work. This is seriously messed up."

"Yes, this is seriously messed up." The clack of cloven hooves echoed through the great hall as Neville moved around his desk and approached the men. "Mr. Knight, your shark-finned rookie isn't going to make it."

Before Zared turned around, his hands fluttered over his head. He'd forgotten the implants were there.

"That's right, Z. You're a demon, a behemoth without emotion, and yet the stench of your virtue is tantalizing. One whiff and the wild imps will fly from their tunnels and caves.

They will descend upon you from every portal in Hell and devour your flesh before you reach the Fifth.” Neville swiped the line of drool from his mouth.

A heavy weight landed on Zared’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I can handle whatever comes at us. We’re good,” Ezra said, but his words fell on deaf ears.

Shoving Ezra’s hand aside, Zared fought against an overwhelming tide of doubt. He paced aimlessly, rubbing the implant that elongated his chin to a sharp point, and wondered how he’d gotten himself into this. *Ezra told me demons were smart. He warned me. So what am I doing here?*

Zared realized he had never truly suffered the pangs of heartbreak until that moment. The pain of his sister’s death wasn’t nearly as horrific as realizing her flesh would forever remain between putrid lips of an insatiable beast because he’d failed. Worse, if he couldn’t survive past the Fifth Circle, Madeline wouldn’t even know he had tried.

A foul odor crawled up Zared’s nostrils, interrupting his thoughts. Neville was standing beside him. “Grant me a small taste and I’ll transport you to the Seventh and spare you the agony of failure.”

“A taste of what?” Zared asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Between Neville’s stumpy fingers was the dagger. He pointed the rust-stained handle at Zared. “For a piece of your flesh, I will place you in the Seventh; with that leap, you gain a small chance to rescue Ms. Wayward.”

Zared knew he couldn’t think about what he was doing. He took the dagger. Removing his left glove, he rotated his bare hand, searching for the best place to start. The hangnail on his thumb, he decided. He slid the thin blade under the cuticle and moved it down, cutting through meat. He sliced the knife to the first knuckle and around, all the way to the bone, like he was peeling an apple. The pain was excruciating, but the only sound Zared made was a single grunt when he finally ripped the flesh away and handed it over to Neville.

The demon slipped the bloody meat between his lips and chewed. Sighing with obvious delight, Neville swallowed and stamped his hoof seven times.

The air was dryer and hotter in the Seventh, and a thick coat of white dust covered the barren landscape. In the distance, a lopsided hill rose out of the desolate plain. As Zared moved closer, he realized the small mountain wasn’t made of rock and dirt but of human remains. Near the bottom, the brittle bones had been reduced to a baby-fine powder, slowly crushed from the ever increasing weight piled on top. The bones in the middle of the pile were fragmented, broken and shattered. But at the peak, the bones were solid skeletons glistening with moisture. Zared knew those bones were fresh.

Ezra, unaffected by the increased temperature and suffocating humidity, walked ahead of Zared. Reaching the base of the hill, he plunged his fist into the crumbling bones.

Zared cradled his injured hand and gasped for air. Realizing he was on the verge of heat stroke, he staggered to catch up to Ezra, only to collapse near his feet.

“Ah, this is the good stuff,” Ezra said.

Zared closed his eyes and wiped the sweat from his brow. When he opened them again, he could hardly believe what he saw.

Ezra had his hand jammed under his nose and was eagerly snorting the calcium dust from his skin. Tilting his head back, he stretched his arms wide. “Best high in Hell, Z.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Zared scrambled to his feet.

Ezra is a complete lunatic.

“Take me to my sister!” Zared said, cringing as he shoved his injured hand back into the leather glove.

Ezra rubbed a larger bit of bone from his upper lip and walked toward the backside of the hill, waving for Zared to follow.

Soon a circle of tall pillars came into view. The columns surrounded a large rectangular table. Perched atop each pillar was a long-toothed harpy. Lying on the stone table wearing nothing but a sheer drape was his sister. Her sleek, brown hair was splayed over the rough end of the slab. She looked almost peaceful, with her arms crossed neatly over her chest. As Zared and Ezra approached, a single harpy screeched, and Madeline opened her eyes.

Zared ran for the table, but he didn’t make it there in time. He could only watch as the bird-like beasts swooped down on his sister and dug their sharp claws into her flesh. She was awake and screaming when they tore through her midsection and carved out her insides.

In a matter of minutes, they’d reduced his lovely sister to a slick bloodstain and a moist pile of bones. Zared reached the stone table and fell to his knees, a vociferous roar exploding in his ears.

Zared’s deafening bellow had scattered the harpies back to their perches, where they sat patting their bloated bellies and picking leftover strips of meat from between their teeth. He cursed them and went about gathering his sister’s bones, but a gnarled hand stopped him.

“This isn’t behavior becoming of a demon, crying over the body of a pathetic sinner.” A smirk tugged at the corner of Ezra’s black lips.

“She doesn’t deserve this!” Zared glared and then charged his superior.

Ezra’s chuckle was cut short when Zared plowed his shoulder into the giant’s gut, throwing all his weight into him. Zared pushed Ezra off his feet and slammed the bigger man’s body to the ground. He followed up the assault with a fast right hook. Then Zared smashed the palm of his hand into the bridge of Ezra’s sharp nose, which only rekindled Ezra’s devilish laughter. *Sick son-of-a-bitch.* Zared cocked his fist to deliver a blow to the bobbing Adam’s apple at the top of Ezra’s throat—

“Stop!” The familiar voice stilled his arm mid-swing.

A blast to the center of Zared’s chest knocked the air from his lungs and left him gasping on his side. Ezra sat up and cracked his knuckles. “Nice job, Fight Club. You just sealed your fate.”

Rolling onto his back, Zared coughed to regain his breath. “Madeline?”

A delicate pair of feet moved past his limited line of sight. Zared lifted his head from the dirt. A few feet from

him stood his sister, fully intact—not a speck of gore could be seen, despite having been devoured by four harpies.

Madeline tilted her head. “Who are you?” Then she turned her questioning gaze to Ezra. “Is this another trick?”

Zared climbed to his feet and unzipped his jacket. “It’s me, Zared.”

Madeline raised an eyebrow, and huffed, “You are not my brother.”

“Oh, but he is. Your wish has been granted,” Ezra said as he got to his feet, and then took a dramatic bow.

Zared thought that, along with being insane, Ezra was hammered—hallucinating in Hell. But he really didn’t give a rat’s ass about Ezra’s sick addiction to the dust of the dead. His sister was all that mattered, and he had to get her out of there. He’d taken a step toward Madeline when she began to retreat. Zared bared his left shoulder.

Madeline gasped and then seized his arm to inspect the tattoo. Running her fingers over the initials of her dead parents, she cried, “What did you do?”

Zared grabbed her in an embrace. Kissing the top of her head, he whispered, “I can’t break your soul out of Hell, but I can take you to a better place.”

Madeline pulled away. Fat tears trickled down her face. “You shouldn’t have come,” she said, shaking her head. “Now that you’re here, I can’t say no.”

Missing her touch, Zared reached out. “Say no to what? Come on. We’re moving you to Limbo.”

Madeline’s entire body vibrated. “No!” she screamed. Turning her back on him, she yelled again and pulled clumps of hair from her scalp. “You have to take my place!”

Even through the extreme heat, Zared felt a chill building at the base of his spine. “What?”

“Every sinner is given the option of exchange, the opportunity to trade places with a soul that’s cleaner than their own,” Ezra said. He slammed his hand down on Zared’s shoulder.

Comprehension hit him like an avalanche. Frozen in place, unable to move or speak, he finally understood. *They tricked me.*

Smoothing the tangles from her hair, Madeline returned to Zared. Her hands were in front of her, fingers intertwined and wringing like a ball of worms. “I’m sorry. You’re the only decent person I know. I love you, brother, but I can’t do this. You survived Mom and Dad’s accident. You’re stronger than I am. You’ll survive this, too.” A smile lifted the corners of Madeline’s mouth.

Anger burned in Zared, melting his ice prison. “Have you gone mad?” The question needed no response. Of course she was crazy. She’d just been eaten by harpies, he thought, and for the umpteenth time. “We’re in Hell! No one survives Hell.”

Ezra stretched his massive arms out wide. “Z, the Gehenna is a sham. It’s not real—but I am.”

All the pieces quickly fell into place. Ezra’s unnatural appearance and odd behavior had nothing to do with his sanity and everything to do with him being a true demon. The folder arriving at his office shortly after Madeline’s death, the offer that lay inside to join the Gehenna Division...the

training and physical transformation that followed hadn’t been so he could move around in Hell unnoticed. It was to keep him from ever being able to leave.

Ezra repositioned himself in front of Madeline, his flaming eyes steady on Zared. “One month into your sister’s sentence, I came to her with an out, as I do with every new soul. Four weeks is a good breaking point. Long story short, she offered you up as a replacement. And now that you’re here, we can make a fair trade.”

“A fair trade?” Zared scoffed. “What makes you think I’ll go along with any of this?”

A toothy smirk transformed Ezra’s grim face. “If you refuse the exchange, your sister goes back on the slab and you’re still stuck here.”

“Maybe she deserves her fate,” Zared snapped.

A feminine gasp sounded behind Ezra. Zared couldn’t see Madeline, but that didn’t stop her grief-stricken face from invading his vision.

Rocking back on his heels, Ezra shook his head. “We both know that’s not true.”

“I shared information on the Gehenna. People know I’m here.” Zared was grasping for a lifeline that wasn’t there.

“You kept your tattoo. Put the demon brand on the wrong arm. You screwed yourself, Z. Besides, you signed.”

The weakness in Zared’s knees forced him to the ground. He hadn’t read past the second page of the contract.

“Nobody reads the whole thing,” Ezra said, now crouching beside him.

The most important decision of Zared’s life was the one to save his sister’s soul. The second most calculated choice he ever made was to keep the tattoo that would identify him as her brother. He never thought those valiant acts would be rewarded with an eternity of torture.

Ezra jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “Now, will it be you or her on that table?”

Zared leaned forward and eyed the stone slab. A sudden wave of sadness crashed over him, washing away any lingering regrets. Madeline was his sister. He could still save her. “If I take her place, what happens to Madeline?”

Ezra stood and extended his arm to offer Zared a hand up. “I escort her to Limbo, as per the terms of our contract.”

It only took a minute for Zared to say goodbye to his sister. Madeline couldn’t voice much in return. She’d clung to him, blubbing sentiments of sorrow and admiration, two emotions he knew she was incapable of feeling. But that was okay. Despite the fear and ongoing agony he was about to face, saving her soul from eternal suffering had been the right thing to do.

Zared looked up into a grey, dust-filled sky. Other than the profiles of the fanged harpies in the four corners of his vision, there was nothing to see, and so he waited. He knew it was only a matter of time before the beasts descended upon his body and took their fill. The only thing worse than anticipating the first feast were the last words Ezra spoke before leaving.

“See you in thirty days, Z.” ■

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BEV VINCENT

TALKS WRITING AND STEPHEN KING

Interview by Robin Lindzer
Press Photo Credit: Provided by Author



I RECENTLY HAD THE PLEASURE OF TALKING WITH BEV VINCENT. He is a renowned Stephen King expert, having written books about King that include, “The Road to the Dark Tower” (a Bram Stoker Award nominee), and “The Stephen King Illustrated Companion,” which was nominated for a 2010 Edgar Award and a 2009 Bram Stoker Award. Bev has also written more than 70 short stories that have appeared world-wide in various mediums. He is a contributing editor to *Cemetery Dance Magazine*, where he provides articles entitled, *News from the Dead Zone*. He also writes book reviews for Onyx Reviews.

I wanted to talk to him solely about the process of writing, but found that I would be remiss if I didn’t mention Stephen King in my interview. Warning: Possible spoilers ahead.

Robin Lindzer (R.L.): Of Stephen King’s novels and short stories that have not made it to the big screen, which would you like to see created for either television or the movie theater?

Bev Vincent (B.V.): *I’ve never seen the adaptation as a necessary part of the creative process. I haven’t seen some of the already existing adaptations, because so many of them are poorly done. I haven’t bothered with, for example, the recent adaptation of “Gramma,” called Mercy. I do have sort of a vested interest in seeing the Dark Tower series come to the big screen, because my most recent book, “The Dark Tower Companion,” was written as a response to the news that Ron Howard and Akiva Goldsman were planning to film the series. I thought there would be people who came to “The Dark Tower” without having read the books and who might want to know more about a certain event, character or place.*

I am looking forward to seeing 11/22/63 on Hulu this year, and I’ll be curious to see how they adapt the Bill Hodges trilogy. There’s a Cell adaptation starring John Cusack and Samuel L. Jackson that I had high hopes for, even though I didn’t particularly like the novel, but the fact that the movie has been in the can for well over a year and can’t find a distributor doesn’t bode well.

R.L.: Can you name your favorite Stephen King short story?

B.V.: *I think I have a defective “favorite” gene. I’ve never understood how people can pick a favorite of most things, given that there are so many options to choose from. Or to rank a top ten list in order—I might be able to come up with ten choices, but putting them in an order pretty much paralyzes me. What makes this one a smidgen better than that one?*

One story from “The Bazaar of Bad Dreams” (King’s recently released book) that I find interesting because of what it does with readers’ loyalties is, A Death. It’s about a man accused of murder, but the story isn’t so much about whether or not he is guilty. Rather, it’s about the things that make another character change his mind about whether the man is guilty, and how that makes him feel when he learns the truth.

R.L.: How about your favorite novel—other than the *Dark Tower* series?

B.V.: *Again, that faulty gene gets in the way. There are so many to pick from. Generally, when I’m asked this question, I say “Bag of Bones.” It was the first King novel that I got to read in its first draft, well before it was published. What intrigued me the most was the way King changed the story upon revision. In the first draft, the subplot wherein Mike Noonan suspects his late wife of infidelity isn’t present. King added this by sprinkling little details throughout the book. It ends up being fundamental to the story, and another writer might have radically upended the book to accomplish this, but I was in awe of how King did it with such a light touch. Then, when I mention “Bag of Bones,” I always add “Lisey’s Story,” because I see the pair as bookends: One is about*

the writer who has lost his wife, and the other is about the writer's wife who has lost her husband.

R.L.: Please describe what is was about Stephen King's writing that piqued your interest.

B.V.: *I picked up "Salem's Lot" in a used bookstore among a stack of other books one weekend back in 1979. At the time, I was reading mostly fantasy and science fiction, but I remembered someone mentioning the book to me a year or so earlier. I didn't know anything about it or the writer, but I was impressed: by the story, by the storytelling and by the characterization. I hadn't read another author who made me care so much about a character like Susan Norton that I was disturbed when something bad happened to her. I sought out his other books—there weren't many in 1979—and quickly discovered it wasn't a fluke. The guy knew how to tell a story and he knew how to create characters. I'd probably still read him if he wrote romance novels, because I know the stories would be clever and the characters credible. There are other writers whose work I've read over the same span of years, but when I look back at the titles, I'm hard pressed to remember what the stories were about, let alone the names of the characters, whereas I have vivid memories of King's books and characters, even if I haven't read a particular book or story in a number of years.*

R.L.: I'd like to step away from Stephen King, and turn the talk towards your writing career. You have written several books (not just about Stephen King), along with over 70 short stories. I believe our readers would be interested in your writing process. At what age did you discover books? Please tell us about the types of books you read while growing up. Has that changed any, or do you still read the same types?

B.V.: *I was what they call a precocious child in that I started reading at a very early age. I used to drive my parents crazy by reading all the signs on the side of the road when we traveled. I can't remember a time when I didn't read. I even used to go to school dances with a paperback stuck in my back pocket in case I got bored. I have a vivid memory—I was probably seven or so at the time—of buying three paperbacks from a discount bin at a department store: "The Wizard of Oz," "The Jungle Book" and "Tales of Mystery and Imagination." I have no doubt that I read the first two, but it was the Poe that stuck with me. I read that book to shreds. The stories were so vivid in my memory that when I went back to reread them later, I was amazed at how brief some of them are. I was sure they were 20 or 30 pages, because there was so much packed into them, but The Tell-Tale Heart and The Cask of Amontillado are only about 2300 words each.*

I migrated to the Hardy Boys and then matured into Agatha Christie. Read 'em all, most of them more than once. I discovered Isaac Asimov and Heinlein, and went through a high school, late-teens phase that was mostly science fiction and fantasy. The Xanth books. Stephen R. Donaldson. Then King led me to horror—all those great anthologies in the early 80s. Koontz, Matheson, Farris, Bradbury—that was a discovery for sure. I've always been fond of crime novels, though. John D. MacDonald, Dashiell Hammett, Chandler, Ross Macdonald.

I don't read nearly as much horror as I once did, and it's rare for me to read science fiction or fantasy these days. I still read Donaldson, though he can be frustrating at times, and the only science fiction that I've read in recent years is Dan Simmons' Hyperion/Endymion series, which I enjoyed. Mostly it's mystery, thrillers and crime fiction, which is one reason I was delighted to hear that King was trying his hand at the genre with the Mr. Mercedes series. I'd enjoyed his straight crime short stories.

I read a bit of non-fiction (I'm reading a book by Frank Delaney right now about The Flying Enterprise, a ship that was disabled in the North Atlantic in the 1950s), and some non-genre fiction. I keep a list on the message board at my website if anyone's interested in what I'm reading. I also have a review blog (Onyx Reviews) that will show you where my interests lie.

My fiction writing has followed a similar arc—I used to write mostly horror but now I write more crime fiction and thrillers. Even when I'm working on something nominally in another genre, I find myself gravitating toward the crime angle. For example, I was invited to submit a story to an anthology that wanted a fresh and contemporary take on vampires, so I wrote a serial killer story where the victims were vampires. I've had a couple of stories in MWA anthologies, one edited by Michael Connelly and another by Jeffery Deaver and Raymond Benson, and I was gratified and thrilled to have the story in the latter, The Honey Trap, nominated for an ITW award in 2015. Awards are nice—I won the Al Blanchard award for a crime story in 2010, too, with the story published in the "Thin Ice" anthology.

R.L.: What event(s) in your life led you to writing?

B.V.: *I find it hard to imagine someone who grew up reading as voraciously as I did not wanting to try their hand at writing at some point. I was given the chance in Grade 8 to write a short story instead of an essay for my English class and the teacher was very supportive. He read the story (and two others) to the class, and wrote on the paper when he returned it that it was good enough to be published. It wasn't, but that's the sort of encouragement that an impressionable mind takes to heart, so to speak.*

As a teenager, I typed up novels that I never finished. Heavily derivative stuff that was a cross between Mickey Spillane and Charlie's Angels! After I started reading King, my interests switched to writing horror short stories—this was when I was an undergraduate at university. I read them to my friends in dorm, but I never considered submitting them anywhere. I rediscovered the manuscripts many years later and found that some weren't bad. With some revision, a few have been published.

But I didn't write for the better part of a decade after my undergraduate years. Doing a Ph.D. in chemistry didn't leave much free time, and I lived overseas for a couple of years, where I spent most of my spare time traveling. I did enter Twilight Zone magazine's short story contest for unpublished writers, but that story was terrible, and I was relieved to discover that one of the judges—Peter Straub—has no recollection of it! The winner was this guy named Dan Simmons—I was well out of my league!

In the late 90s, after attending a local writer's guild meeting where Joe R. Lansdale was the guest speaker, I was inspired to start writing again. Lansdale didn't talk a lot about writing. Instead, he sat at the front of the room and told stories. Anecdotes from his life, many of them probably tall tales or embellishments.

My biggest barrier was the fact that I didn't have a place to write. Each time, I had to dig out my laptop, find a place to set up, assemble my papers, and it was far too easy to convince myself to do something else. Watch TV. So, for my birthday I asked my wife for a place to write, and she got me a roll-top desk where I could spread things out and work, but then pull the top down at the end of a session and leave my mess as it was. Best. Gift. Ever. That was really the beginning of my secondary career as a writer.

R.L.: Can you talk about what you are currently working on?

B.V.: I'm getting ready to do the third draft of "The Dead of Winter," a 40,000-word novella that is the longest horror story I've ever written. It will be paired with a novella written by Brian Keene for a project we're calling "Dissonant Harmonies."

Rich Chizmar is doing this project called "Stephen King Revisited" in which he is rereading King's books in publication order and writing his thoughts about the book from his first reading and now. I'm doing companion essays that set each book in its historical context: what was going on in King's life when he was writing the book and anything else interesting I can dig up about the book's creation. This will take us a couple of years, and eventually the essays—which are being posted at the "Stephen King Revisited" website—will all be collected into a book, I expect, but I have to make sure I keep a step or two ahead of Rich, so I always have one of these essays on the go!

I'm also knee deep in a novel. I started one in September, but I realized after a few weeks that I needed to write a different book first, so I set those pages aside and have about 12,000 words done on the new book. Ideally, there will be a series featuring this set of characters. They're crime novels, and I've been thinking about these stories for a number of years. At last I think I'm ready to see them through to completion.

Plus, there's always a short story or two percolating in the background.

R.L.: Is there anything that you dislike about the writing process?

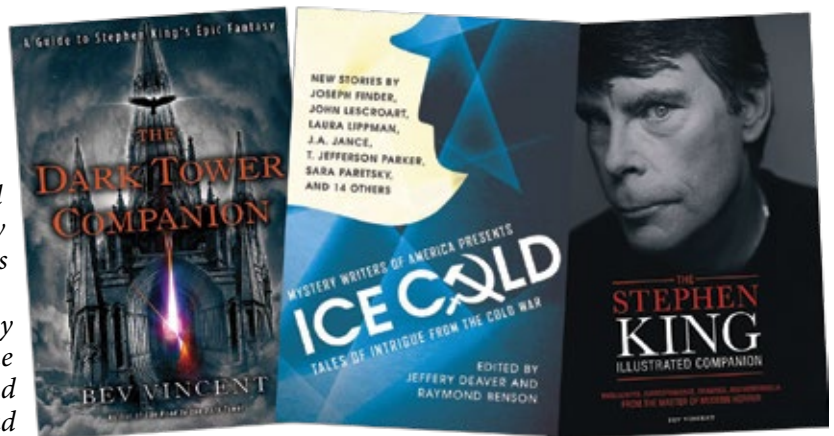
B.V.: I'm not a big fan of the waiting that's involved when you submit something. I like instant gratification, and having to wait three or six months to find out if something you've written will be accepted for publication sucks. But it's part of the process, and too many young writers are taking shortcuts by self-publishing before they're ready. Editors are sometimes regarded as gatekeepers, preventing people from being published, but they're there for a reason. Can you imagine what it would be like to go to the movie theater and see a thousand possible movies made by anyone who could figure out how to use video editing software? How would you ever find the good stuff from among all the dreck? So I accept that waiting is necessary, but I don't like it!

I also dislike waiting for something to come out after it's been accepted for publication. In the small press especially, things can drag on for months or years, publication dates fly by, and some markets just vanish without ever coming out. That's frustrating.

R.L.: Do you recommend a new author finding an agent for a book that he or she has written? If so, do you have any advice on the best way to find a reputable agent?

B.V.: I didn't get my agent in the usual way. I first "sold" my book—or at least found a publisher for it—then I went in search of an agent to represent my interests during the contract phase. It's a lot easier to get representation when there's already something to represent. But I was cautious about who I went with. I researched agents on Preditors and Editors to find out which ones to stay away from. At the time I did my research, most of the annotations were neutral unless they were negative, but the Ethan Ellenberg Agency was marked "recommended," which caught my interest, as did the fact that they took email queries, which wasn't the norm 10+ years ago. My agent subsequently left the agency to strike out on his own, and I went with him.

I haven't paid a lot of attention to the agency business since then, but at the time there were some dodgy characters out there—enough that Preditors and Editors had to exist to warn people away from the bad



actors. The biggest red flag is any agent who wants to charge you money up front. They try to make it sound reasonable—to help defray the costs of photocopying or postage—but reputable agents make their money AFTER they sell something of yours, not before. They take a commission from the sale. That motivates them to sell your stuff and to get the best deal. If they can get enough people to pay them trifling amounts up front, then they have less incentive. Also beware of agents that are affiliated with specific small presses. If you see that all of their clients are published through the same small press you've never heard of before, beware!

The best course is to contact other writers who are represented by the agent you are interested in querying, after you've done your due diligence to winnow down the field. Find out how happy they are. I never mind answering questions about my agents when they come up.

R.L.: How do you feel about social media when it comes to promoting books and short stories?

B.V.: I've been involved with the internet since its inception. I used email in the mid-1980s, before the internet was a thing, and I started the corporate website for the company where I work over 20 years ago. I'm a big fan of social media. I'm as likely to post a link to something that's new from me as I am to repost or retweet an interesting news article. It's all about balance. Some people are ferocious self-promoters, and that can be wearisome. I don't have any Facebook pages devoted to my books or stories, and I've never become a fan of someone's book page. I don't see the point. I'm generally a one-and-done poster when it comes to promoting something new, though that "one" means one FB post, one tweet, one mention in my blog, one post on a relevant message board, one announcement to the newsletters of the organizations to which I belong, etc. Maybe even a press release to local papers if it's something big, like when I was nominated for the Edgar Award. In other words, I try to hit all the bases. But I also generate interesting content unrelated or only peripherally related to my output, so I have a "following." People have emailed me to say I make their Twitter feeds more interesting—I liked that a lot. I want people to have a bit of a sense of who I am, or what I like or what I think is important / relevant in modern society. I'm not just a self-promotion engine.

R.L.: Since you are also a Doctor Who fan who wrote the short story, *Leap Second*, in the book "Doctor Who, Destination: Prague," I thought we'd have some fun. If you could travel in the T.A.R.D.I.S., would you visit the past or the future? Why?

B.V.: It might be interesting to go back in time to find the answer to a lingering mystery, like who was Jack the Ripper, but the future is the real mystery. How much of one do we have? But it might be depressing to jump ahead and find out that things have become dismal and dreary. So, rather than risk that, I think I'd go elsewhere, assuming there is any other place that has life. It wouldn't matter whether it was past or future. Just finding out that something existed off this chunk of rock, and getting to see what it's like, that would be the best, I think. One of my issues with Doctor Who is that it is too Earth-centric sometimes. There's a whole universe out there to explore.

R.L.: This last question is one that I would have a difficult time answering, because I like so many different authors. If you were able to go out to dinner with four authors, which ones would you like to have sit at your table? What would you like to discuss?

B.V.: One of the cool things about this business is that I've had the chance to go out to dinner with many authors over the years, primarily at writing conferences. Peter Straub and I had dinner when he was on a book signing tour a number of years ago and I've gotten to hang out with him at conferences. I made friends with Michael Koryta at a conference a couple of years ago and went to dinner with him when he was in town for a book signing recently. Michael Slade and I have gone out drinking in New Orleans! I've gotten to spend time with King and Doug Clegg and Brian Keene and a whole raft of other writers.

I met Ray Bradbury many years ago, and have a photo of him tugging on my ear on my Facebook page, but I only got to exchange a few words with him at the signing and I think he'd be a fascinating person with whom to break bread. I'm not sure I could keep up with Umberto Eco, but I've always been fascinated by his work. I'd add Haruki Murakami to the list—I'm intrigued by the way he sets stories in a culture that is very alien to ours and makes them totally relatable. To round out my four, let's add PD James. I admire the fact that she started writing later in life. I'd hoped to meet her at the Edgars ceremony—we were both nominated in the same category—but alas she wasn't able to attend. That would be a good mix of writers, eras, cultures, wouldn't it?

And as for the discussion, I'd probably just sit back and let them go at it. See where the conversation led. Each would be fascinating in his or her own right. I don't know that I'd contribute much because I'd want to hear what they'd have to say.

That could be a fun pastime, couldn't it? Figuring out different sets of four writers to match up. The living and the dead, the American and the foreign. Young and old. Have dinner with Poe, John D. MacDonald, Agatha Christie and Alex Haley. Wow. I could do this all day!

Bev, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to answer my many questions. You have been an inspiration of mine for years, and I have enjoyed talking with you. If readers are interested in keeping up with Bev Vincent's success, they can navigate to <http://www.bevvincent.com> for the latest information. ■

HER PLAN HAD ONE SMALL HICCUP...

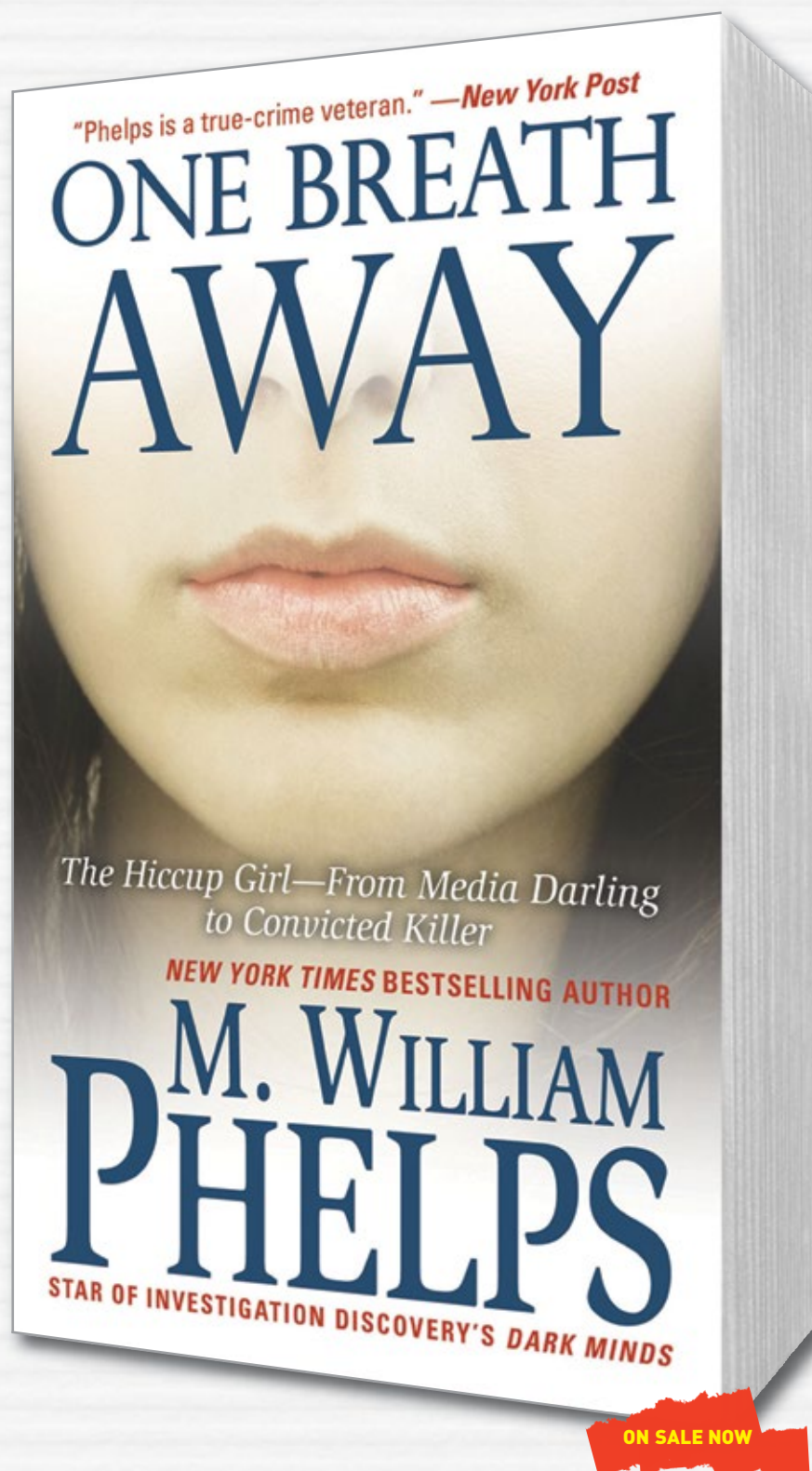
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PETER STRAUB

SHINES THE LIGHT INTO “INTERIOR DARKNESS”



Interview by *Suspense Magazine*
Press Photo Credit: Jennifer Calivas

Peter Straub, one of the greatest horror writers of our time, has just released his latest book of short stories, “Interior Darkness.”

Many don’t know that Peter didn’t start out writing stories that scare the hell out of readers, his first published works were of poetry. It was back in the late 60’s and early 70’s that Peter published “Ishmael” and “Open Air.”

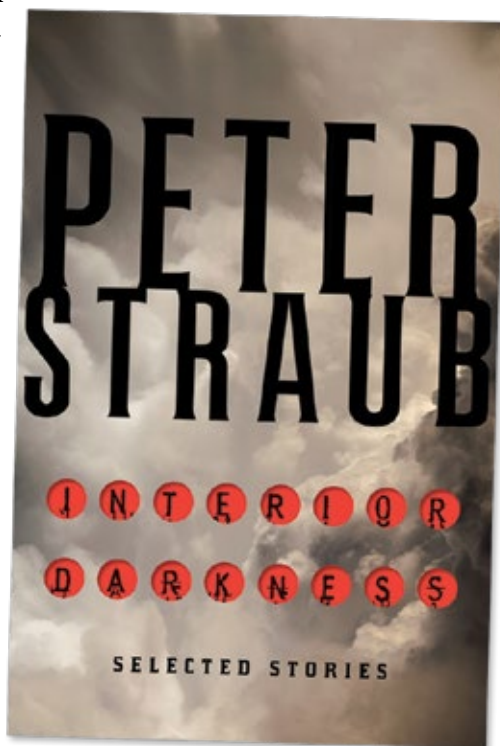
Like many horror writers he, too, was bitten by the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. He and his wife Susan bought a house on Hillfield Avenue in Crouch End, London, and had their first child, Benjamin, born during the writing of “Ghost Story,” the book he is best known for. Then in 1984, “Talisman” was published, co-authored by Stephen King, with the sequel being a 2001 release called “Black House.” In between those two iconic books, Peter had several books nominated for the Bram Stoker award, with

“The Throat” winning the title. He is a member of HWA, MWA, PEN, and though he is without “hobbies,” remains intensely interested in jazz, as well as opera and other forms of classical music.

Let’s take a quick look at his latest book, “Interior Darkness,” and then we invite you to enjoy our exclusive interview with Peter for his first feature in *Suspense Magazine*.

An American icon renowned for his bestselling novels, Peter Straub displays his full and stunning range in this crowning collection. He has consistently subverted the boundaries of genre for years, transcending horror and suspense to unlock the dark, unsettling, and troubling dissonances that exist on the edges of our perception. Straub’s fiction cracks the foundation of reality and opens our eyes to an unblinking experience of true horror, told in his inimitable and lush style with skill, wit, and impeccable craft.

With uncanny precision, Straub writes of the city and of the Midwest, of the depraved and of the righteous, of the working class and of the wealthy—nothing and no one is safe from the ever-present darkness that he understands so well. “Blue Rose” follows the cycles of violence and power through the most innocent among us, leading to a conclusion that is audacious and devastating. In the darkly satirical masterpiece, “Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff,” a stern estate lawyer known as the Deacon hires a pair of “Private Detectives Extraordinaire” to investigate and seek revenge on his unfaithful wife. “The Ballad of Ballard



and Sandrine” follows a man and his much younger lover as they explore their decadent and increasingly sinister fantasies aboard a luxurious yacht on the remotest stretch of the Amazon River.

“Interior Darkness” brings together sixteen stories from twenty-five years of dazzling excellence. It is a thrilling, highly entertaining, and terrifying testament to the prodigious talent of Peter Straub.

Suspense Magazine (S. MAG.): “Interior Darkness” is your latest collection of short stories. With so many stories to choose from in your library, how did you go about choosing these?

Peter Straub (P.S.): *Making the choices was a difficult matter. Initially, I thought we could do a Complete Stories, but that would have demanded two volumes. Two was one too many. So I started by listing my favorites of my own work, then trimming that list down more or less day by day until I had reached a sensible page length, i.e. 500 pages or under. Order was not a problem since I went chronologically book by book, but within that structure, I needed to find a balance of themes and presentations, while still fitting in the longer pieces I think of as my most interesting work. In the end, I managed to include all but maybe two or three of these works.*

S. MAG.: How much different is short story writing to novel writing, besides the length?

P.S.: *It goes faster, the satisfactions come more quickly, and if only because at the level of time spent less is at stake, it is possible to experiment more, to take more chances.*

S. MAG.: Is short story writing a good way for you to continue to challenge yourself as an author and keep your writing fresh?

P.S.: *Given what I have just said, the answer is probably yes. However, the writing of long fiction offers every bit as many challenges, not to mention moments of terrible self-doubt and actual terror, as short fiction can provide. Emotionally, the whole enterprise is a roller-coaster ride through a haunted castle.*

S. MAG.: Is there a specific story in “Interior Darkness” that you would say captures the essence of the book?

P.S.: *Little Red’s Tango, maybe—it glides off in a number of unexpected directions, it alludes to horror writing without really participating in it; it should keep the reader nicely off-balance in what I hope is an enjoyable way.*

S. MAG.: Many authors use short stories to “test” out

characters and see how they develop before

writing a full length novel, do you do that?

P.S.: *Blue Rose, the first story in the collection, was a way to road-test “KOKO’s” Harry Beevers, to get a close-up look at him before trying to place him in the novel. I think that’s the only time I’ve ever done anything like that.*

S. MAG.: What scares Peter Straub?

P.S.: *More than you could ever imagine. After all this time, I have learned to live with that—learned how to live with it, really. Like every other affliction, it has its own set of compensations.*

S. MAG.: I think many people would be surprised to know that you started out writing poetry. Do you ever see yourself writing another poetry book?

P.S.: *It would be great to write and publish a new book of poems, but I am pretty sure poetry left me, and for good. After I had spent a couple of years writing lines that always went all the way across the page, I couldn’t remember how to write shorter ones. Enjambment seemed to have left me. I still love poetry, though, and read a huge amount of it. Lately I’m in a kind of Laura Sims-J.D. McClatchy phase.*

S. MAG.: Is there any more news about finishing up the third book with Stephen King?

P.S.: *We do intend to write a third volume, but I have slowed things down immensely, with both health problems and difficulties with the novel I’ve had in progress for years now. One of these days, if Steve has enough patience. We have a terrific idea for the book, I can tell you that.*

S. MAG.: With so many books in your library, for a new reader just finding you, where would be a good place for them to start?

P.S.: *I’d suggest either “Ghost Story” or “Mystery.”*

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

P.S.: *I guess I could describe it as a novel that involves a modern-day Jack the Ripper and the third-richest woman in America, who happens to be his sister. The actual Henry James has been excised, alas, from the dramatis personae.*

We would like to thank Peter for taking the time to speak with us, this was quite an honor. For more information on Peter please visit his website www.peterstraub.net. ■

HOW TO TWEET LIKE A PRO

By Lynne Constantine



YOU'VE SET UP A KILLER PROFILE, been faithfully building your following, even started categorizing your followers into lists. Now you have to give people a reason to continue to follow you—but how?

You've probably heard the expression: "Content is King" (or Queen) depending on your point of view. So what is good content? Remembering that social media is all about building relationships and connections—ask yourself what you might say to a new friend or colleague you've just met. What kind of first impression would you make if the first thing you did was introduce yourself and ask her to buy your book?

As in real life, online interactions should be mutually beneficial. There's nothing wrong with an occasional self-promoting tweet, but I promise you, if that's all you tweet, you'll find a dwindling following and a fast declining engagement. So what should you tweet?

- Relevant articles on writing and publishing (helpful how to on: writing, querying, editing, social media)
- News about the industry (new agents, new publishing deals)
- Inspirational quotes (everyone loves a good quote)
- Links to your original blog content on your website (drives traffic to your site without blatant self-promotion)
- Book reviews
- Blurbs promoting other authors (they may reciprocate, and having others promote you is always better than promoting yourself)
- Other people's tweets (everyone likes to be retweeted)
- Encouraging and affirming responses to other tweets (congratulating good news, offering advice to a question)
- Self-promotion (no more than 20% of the time – links to your book, reviews, special pricing, interviews, news about your book)
- Follow Friday: don't neglect this one. Using hashtag #FF tells others accounts you think they should follow. This is a great way to show your appreciation for others as well as to get attention from those you want to notice you

No time for all that content curation? There are tools that will gather that information for you based on keywords you set, and deliver a stream for you to choose from each day. Some examples are: Scoop It, Pocket, Feedly, Storify, and Swayy. Google alerts are another great way to have news delivered to your inbox. If you still find the prospect daunting, consider getting some coaching help or professional services. I'm happy to answer questions at lynne@lynneconstantine.com. ■

For more articles on social media and writing visit: <http://lynneconstantine.com/category/blog> and if you'd like some social media support, check out Lynne's Twitter Package for authors: <http://bit.ly/authorpackage>.

Lynne is a coffee drinking, Twitter addicted, fiction writer always working on her next book. She is the co-author of "Circle Dance," a family saga written with her sister, as well as two other novels to be released soon. She is the managing partner of a social media consulting firm and gives talks on the role of social media in publishing and how to establish a solid author platform. Lynne is a contributing editor to International Thriller Writer's online magazine, The Big Thrill.

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Every Wife Has A Story

A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

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Every Wife Has A Story

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Includes
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A Carol and Jim Andrews Baby Boomer Mystery

Susan Santangelo

Author of *Retirement Can Be Murder*

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<http://babyboommysteries.com>

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HARD COLD WINTER

By Glen Erik Hamilton
Press Photo Credit: Michael Helms

CHAPTER 1

I stood on a dark road, on the north side of the ship canal that wound like a lazy snake off of Puget Sound. Wind coming off the water stripped another twenty degrees from a night that was already below freezing. No homeless in the little park across the canal tonight. They knew better. Stay in one place too long, and this cold would kill you.

The road was empty. Normal for midnight on a Saturday, but the place might have been just as quiet at noon. Across the road from me was a row of small warehouses lining the canal. A few of the warehouses boasted unbroken windows and exterior lights, weak sixty-watt dots that barely cracked the gloom. Most of the business owners had given up, and boarded up. A neighborhood on the final and fastest part of its downslope.

One feeble lamp dusted specks of light over black letters painted five feet high on the warehouse nearest me. After a decade or two of erosion by rain and wind, the words were barely visible on the cracked wood siding. LONERGAN REPAIR LLC.

Nobody in sight.

But lots of cars.

Not all grouped out in front of the Lonergan building. Nothing that obvious. But parked here and there along the road and on the side streets were Camaros and Beemer 6 convertibles and higher-end Toyotas with aftermarket racing gear. I'd marked the cars when I'd circled around, getting a feel for the place. Cars for young guys, guys with money to burn. The resale value of my old blue Dodge pickup wouldn't buy a set of rims for most of them.

There was one guard, watching me from the driver's seat of a Ford Excursion thirty yards up the road. I couldn't see him, but I could hear the Ford's engine. So he could keep the heater going.

My cell phone showed no signal here. Not surprising. There would be no calling ahead to announce my arrival.

I walked across the road and up to the warehouse, and around the side of the building toward the water. My breath made visible puffs in the air. The leather of my hiking boots creaked. I'd bought them when I'd returned home to Seattle to stay, less than a month before, and they weren't completely broken in.

The back of the warehouse faced the canal. On the loading dock, six steps up from the pavement, the big metal rolling door was down. Light shone from underneath, where the rubber stripping was cracked with age. I could hear the faint sound of many voices inside, blended together.

At the far side of the dock was a human-sized door, also closed. A man leaned against it, smoking a cigarette, looking at me. With only the dim light coming across the water, neither of us could see each other clearly. He had a walkie-talkie to his ear. Maybe complaining about the cold to his partner, who was warm and cozy in the Excursion.

I walked up the steps and across the loading dock.

"Willard called me," I said.

He glanced down at the bleach-stained Mariners sweatshirt I was wearing. My grandfather's. Now mine. I'd inherited

it along with almost all of Dono's other worldly goods ten months ago, the last time I was in Seattle. But I still tended to think of the house and everything inside of it as his.

"What's your name?" the guard said. He was a beefy guy, about two bucks and change and taller than me. He'd weighed closer to one-ninety when he'd bought his black sport coat. His biceps and shoulders strained the fabric. Maybe it was intentional.

"Get Willard," I said, stepping a little closer. The guard's eyes caught the scars on my face, held there. His jaw went a little slack.

"O-kay, Chief," he said. "I know who you mean. Stay right here."

He knocked twice on the door, his eyes still on me, and it opened a crack. He went in. Light flooded out onto the dock, and I caught a glimpse of a slim girl lifting a tray of drinks from a bar, and another guard in another black sport coat, glowering at me before the door closed.

When it opened, light didn't come booming out again. There was no room for it, not around Will Willard.

Willard was one of the largest men I'd ever known. It wasn't just his height, or weight. He was massive. Like a granite block from a quarry, cut to man-shape and set loose.

"Get in here," he said. His voice had come from the same pit, pieces smashed to gravel and turned over and over in a concrete mixer.

I followed him into the bright interior of the warehouse, the light provided by dozens of work lamps and the occasional tiki torch. Half a dozen circular tables covered in green felt were set up around the broad room. Six or eight men sat at each, playing cards. Each table had a dealer, and a wooden shoe from which the dealers swept cards across the felt. All of the dealers were female, dressed in black blouses and short black skirts. All of them looked attractive from where I was standing. If it wasn't for the warehouse setting, it could have been the back room at any tribal casino in the state.

"Nice setup," I said.

"Portable," Willard said. "It all fits into a moving van."

I wondered if he counted the hot dealers as part of that truckload. "This a regular thing for you?"

"Regular enough."

Enough to mean he didn't have to set up other jobs, I guessed. Willard was in the same line of work as my grandfather had been. They had been partners, on occasion. Burglaries. Robbery. Whatever paid. With his giant size, Willard was way too memorable to work up front, but he could handle a steering wheel or a welding torch better than most. Reliable. And a bigger brain than anyone would expect, behind that Cro-Magnon brow.

"Is it yours?" I said.

Willard didn't reply. I waited, watching the tables. The card games were simple. Blackjack or Texas or variations of stud. The players were all male, and all under thirty. An

even assortment of white and Asian and Indian, outfitted in Seattle Hip—laser-straight blue jeans and thick boots and plaid button-downs and logo T-shirts too expensive to look new. I guessed them for the sons of tech movers and venture capital shakers, or maybe they were rising stars themselves. Every once in a while, one of them would glance over at Willard. He had that effect.

I recognized one player. Reuben Kuznetsov. He hadn't spotted me yet. If I was lucky, he would stay focused on his cards.

"It's a partnership," Willard said finally. "I take it on the road. Kick a little up to whoever has the territory. Everybody wins."

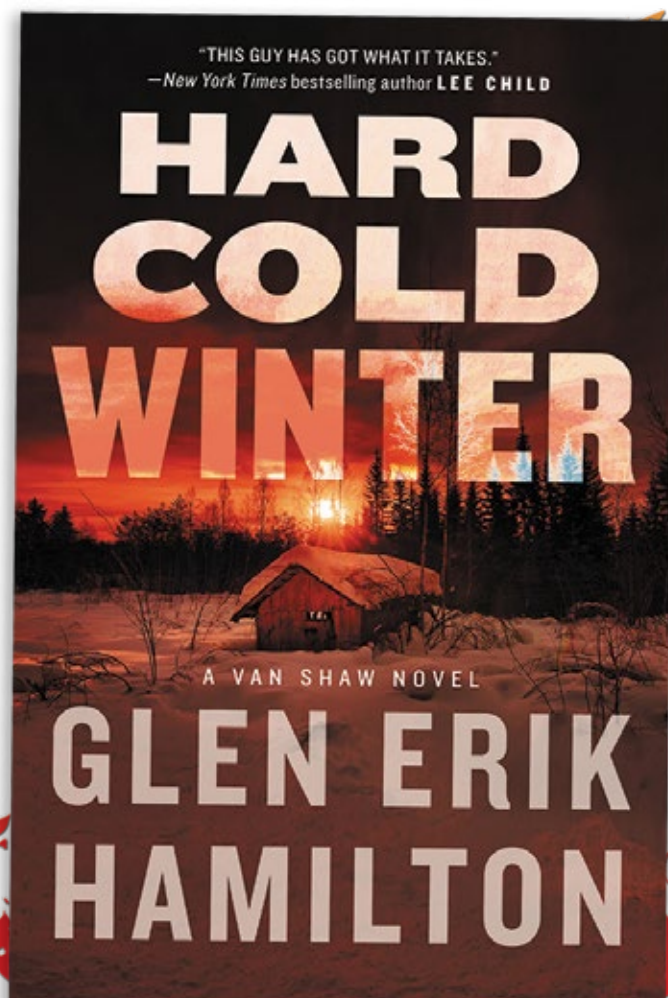
"Way cool crowd."

He exhaled slowly. "It is what it is. Kids sick of online poker want a taste of the real thing."

And an underground game, staffed by thugs and dealt by babes, would make a hell of a lot cooler story for them than driving out to the Indian reservations to join the blue-hairs. Judging by the cars outside, I put the buy-in somewhere in the low five figures. With a third of it going to the house, for the privilege.

"You're using a jammer," I said, stating the obvious. No way any of this was winding up on some geek's Twitter feed.

Willard almost sighed. "It's not enough. We have to



put all the gadgets into a box, just to keep the idiots from snapping pictures. It's like taking away a hype's syringe."

"So why am I seeing all this glory?" I said.

Willard walked slowly around to the back of the room. I followed him to the small bar. It was a real bar, with sinks and soda guns, with the whole thing on casters for easy transport. A petite girl with a waist-length fall of dark brown hair stood behind it. She gave us both a big smile.

"You want?" Willard said to me.

"If you mean a drink, I'll take whiskey. Neat."

"You got a brand, handsome?" said the bartender.

"Anything Irish," I said.

"Faithful to your roots," said Willard.

"Dono would have enjoyed this." I nodded at the room. The bartender poured us both two fingers of Jameson 12 in crystal lowball glasses. Posh.

"Here's to him," said Willard, "I miss the son of a bitch."

We drank. I was enjoying the first icy touch of air in my throat chasing the liquor when someone put a hand on my shoulder.

"I know this fucking face," said Reuben K. "Well, half of it, anyway." He laughed at his own joke. So did the short guy standing behind him, on cue.

"Reuben," I said.

Reuben Kuznetsov was the eldest son of a Bratva crime boss, in the loosely affiliated Russian mob. His father, Old Lev, wasn't the only boss with a thumb on the North Pacific coast. He swung more weight and spent more time in Siberia than in Seattle. But connected was connected. And Reuben K lived his life in the decadent West, free from consequences.

"The fuck you doing in Seattle, Van?" he said. Reuben was all extremities. A big square head balanced on his neck, big hands and big feet stuck onto sinewy limbs. He stood close, leaning his high forehead down like an oily sunlamp. "I heard you went into the Army. Killing for your country."

"All good things," I said.

"My people could have told you to keep your ass out of Afghanistan. No way you win in that shithole." He looked me over. "You need work? I have work for somebody like you."

"Just visiting." I nodded at Willard, standing as expressive as a marble column behind me.

Reuben brushed some imaginary dust off the sleeve of his glossy blue 38-long jacket. "Too bad. Good money."

"RuKu," said Reuben's buddy, looking back at the table. "Game's back on." He was a fireplug. Short but wide as hell, with huge trapezius muscles in search of a neck, and stuffed into a silver Raiders jacket. A constellation of anabolic acne on his forehead.

Reuben ignored him. "Hey, Willard," he said. "I still want to get that cage match idea rolling, yes?" He mimed punching. "This crowd could go for a little blood."

"Next year," said Willard.

"How 'bout next weekend?" Reuben jabbed me on

the shoulder. "You should get in on that, Van my man. I remember you. Fucking werewolf."

"Catch you later, Reuben," I said.

He grinned and smoothed his slick brown hair back in place. "Nobody fast enough for that, Shaw."

Back when I was a teenager, and Reuben not much older, he was running a whorehouse made up of Novosibirsk girls buying their way into the land of opportunity the only way they could. Reuben sampled the goods as much as he sold them. And he was prone to beating up customers who liked his favorites. The smart johns didn't fight back. Old Lev could make it much worse. The whole situation had given Reuben the idea he was a badass.

Reuben's silvery friend gave me what he thought was a hard stare as they drifted back to the table.

I looked at Willard. "Like I said. Way cool crowd."

"I told you. I kick up to whoever owns the area. Lev's reasonable."

Willard drained the last of his Jameson, put the glass down on the bar. He was looking out at the tables, but his focus was somewhere else.

"It's my niece," he said. "Elana."

I stopped in midsip. "I remember."

"Course you do."

"I thought she moved east somewhere."

"And back to Seattle and then south and back here again, for a couple of years now." He waved a shovel-blade hand. "None of that is the point. The point is that she's not here. Not tonight, and not last night either. She was supposed to be working the tables."

"She's not checking in?"

"She left me a message last night to say she was sorry she didn't show up for work, but she was headed out to the peninsula. To her boyfriend Kend's cabin, up in the Olympic Forest."

"And she said she'd be back for tonight?"

"Yeah. I got the impression the trip was a last-minute thing. Maybe a party. I didn't think much about it. But I couldn't reach her today. And she didn't show during set-up. That's when I called you."

"Elana do that a lot? Blow off work to party?"

"She'd done it before."

"No cell phone towers in the mountains. If she decided to extend her weekend through tonight, she couldn't tell you."

"I know that," he said, exhaling heavily.

"But you called me."

"Elana's easy to read. There was something in her tone, I guess. Too calm. Too flat."

Not like the Elana Coll I remembered at all. A girl of fire, or ice, but not much in between.

"Anything wrong in her life right now?" I said.

Willard grunted. "She's her own person. She insists on it. You know that."

I watched the room for a minute. The games were slow. Inexperienced players, taking their time with every decision, trying hard to look like the guys they'd seen on TV.

"What do you know about Kend?" I said.

"I've met him. Here, in fact. Not this location, but Elana brought him to a couple of the card games we had during the past year. She was showing off a little, I think. Kend seemed all right. Less spoiled than most of these little shits."

"He's rich?" I said.

"He's Kendrick Haymes."

The curve balls just kept coming, low and inside. "Haymes as in ... ?"

"Haymes as in," Willard confirmed. "Nobody starts a question with those words unless the family's fucking loaded, do they?"

The name Haymes was on a lot of buildings around Seattle. Hell, all around the western half of the state and a few beyond. Kend was a hell of a catch for any girl, especially one with Elana's jagged background.

Willard would have been the black sheep of most families. But Elana's parents, Willard's sister and her husband, had been aggressively committed burnouts. Stoned all day and calling it spiritual. Elana had lived with them in whatever mobile home or camper van they'd squatted in that year. If they were away dancing around some tree in some jungle, she might accept a little help from Willard. Somehow she had survived.

As hard-ass as my grandfather had been, I knew even back then that my home life could have been worse.

Willard tapped his knuckles on the bar. "Tomorrow night I got to have this whole damn room set up in Portland. In California the day after that. Besides, I don't know shit about finding things in the woods." He looked at me. "You do."

"Tell me you can narrow that down."

"The cabin's on private land in the east part of the national park. Inholder, they call it. I got the name of the road it's on."

"Some of those private tracts cover thousands of acres," I said. "But forget that for a minute. Is there some reason you're not calling the county sheriff about Elana? Besides the usual history with you and the cops."

"She's not in any trouble, far as I know."

"As far as you know."

Willard stared at the bustling room. "You're not Dono's kid anymore. I get that. I wouldn't ask you if I thought there would be problems."

Once upon a time, it wouldn't have mattered what Elana might be into. I could have matched her beat for beat in making trouble. B.&E. G.T.A. Grand larceny. Dono had trained me very well.

But like Willard said, I wasn't that kid anymore.

He reached into his pocket and put a small roll of hundreds on the bar. "Just check in on her, all right? It's stupid of me to get wound around the axle on this. Elana probably

just blew off work for a couple of nights. But she's family."

He didn't have to say I owed him. He was there during Dono's last days.

"I'll find her," I said.

He nodded. "I'll call you after the game breaks up tonight. Tell you what I know about the cabin."

Willard slipped me the bills as we shook hands. I wove through the tables full of designer hoodies to the exit.

I'd think of it as a weekend excursion. A paid vacation. I could use the thousand bucks. An honorable discharge and the thanks of a grateful nation hadn't bought me much in terms of job prospects.

Outside, Reuben K and his fireplug friend in the Raiders jacket were chatting with the guard at the door. Somebody had turned the exterior light back on. Reuben was smoking. Hand-rolled tobacco, laced with something stronger from the smell of it.

"You really work for the big man now, my friend? Willard's past his ex-pir-ation," he said to me, drawing out the syllables.

"Just dropping by."

"So you say, so you say. Still, you want something better, you know where."

"Not my idea of better," I said.

"What the fuck does that mean?" said Fireplug. "You watch your mouth, asswipe." His pupils were pinpricks. The guard chuckled.

I looked at Reuben. "He one of yours?" I said.

"Hmm?" Reuben had a little trouble focusing. "Pauly? No, he's jus' hanging around."

"You wanna go?" Pauly said. He was up on his toes, hands already tightened into fists at his sides.

I put my hand on Pauly's face and shoved hard. He took a step back, right off the edge of the loading dock, and fell five feet backward onto the asphalt. The impact sounded like a sack of melons.

The guard hadn't moved. He just stared at me. Pauly moaned. And Reuben started cracking up.

"If he needs an ambulance," I said to the guard as I walked down the steps, "you wait until Willard's moved his stuff out."

"Hey, Shaw," Reuben yelled after me, still bent over with laughter. "You come back when we get the cage matches going. I swear I split any bets you win for me. Fucking beast."

■

A native of Seattle, Glen Erik Hamilton grew up aboard a sailboat, and spent his youth finding trouble around the marinas and commercial docks and islands of the Pacific Northwest. He now lives in California with his family, punctuated by frequent visits to his hometown to soak up the rain.

Excerpt from "Hard Cold Winter" by Glen Erik Hamilton (Coming from William Morrow, March 2016)

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