

Getting Away With Murder

Mike Ripley



January 2011

Boulevard of Broken Dreams

I pride myself on being one of the staunchest supporters of the Great British Post Office; or more specifically, Her Majesty's elite corps of postmen and women who defy the odds to make sure the mail gets through whatever the conditions. It is with a heavy heart, however, that I have to admit that somewhere along the line, my invitation to the red carpet Leicester Square premiere of the film *London Boulevard* seems to have gone missing.



I was so looking forward to mingling with the stars of the film – exchanging Cockney accents with Colin Farrell, fashion tips with Keira Knightley and Anna Friel, and hints on embroidery with Ray Winstone – not to mention, of course, meeting up again with the author of the original novel, Ken Bruen.

When *London Boulevard* was first published in 2001 by the legendary Do Not Press (the new film tie-in version is from Transworld Ireland), Ken Bruen was not then associated with the tag ‘the Godfather of Irish crime writing’ or at least not outside various public houses in Camden Town. He was best known for his short story *Mother’s Ruin* in the cult anthology *Fresh Blood 2* edited by Maxim Jakubowski and...er...myself; and for the novel *The Hackman Blues* which was reviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* as “a frantic and often very funny example of a London noir thriller as a manic, gay hit-man attempts to double-cross an Irish gangster with a Gene Hackman obsession” by a discerning critic (...er...myself, actually).

Since those youthful, far-off days, Ken has of course gone on to conquer America and the world with his short, staccato, almost poetic crime novels, several of which have been snapped up for the silver screen.

I am sure I remember Ken saying to me, quite distinctly, only last year, that he would invite me to the premiere followed by a champagne candle-lit supper with Kiera and Anna in one of the West End’s finest restaurants. He even offered the use of his private helicopter to bring me up to town from the country and I seem to remember something about a case of single malt Irish whiskey...though perhaps at my great age, the memory plays tricks on one.

Don’t Need the Competition

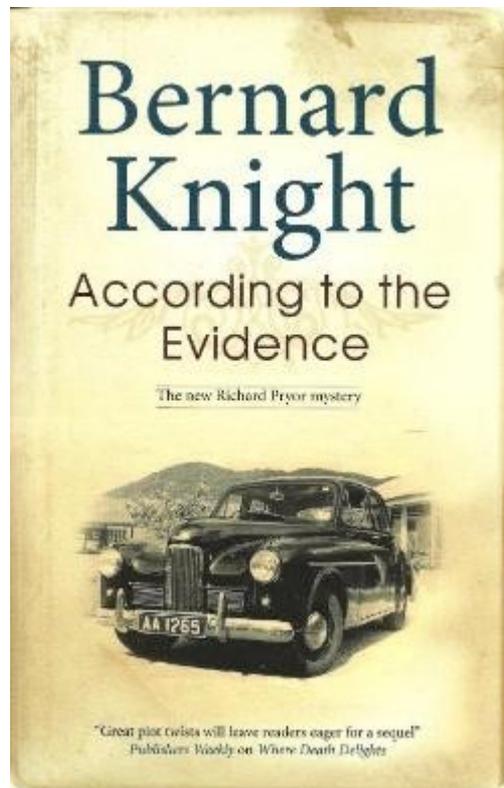
Any fan of the historical/sci-fi/adventure-romance genre (and there are several million worldwide) will immediately recognise the name of that most talented and successful American writer, Diana Gabaldon.

Crime fans may not know the name so wellyet....and crime writers should be nervous as the vivacious Ms Gabaldon has been signed for her first contemporary crime novel, *Red Ant’s Head*, by Orion who intend to publish it here in 2012.

According to the Evidence

For many of his fans, Christmas was made perfect by the publication of a second mystery to feature Richard Pryor as the hero sleuth.

No, not *that* Richard Pryor, but the consultant forensic scientist plying his trade in the beautiful Wye valley on the Welsh border in the early 1950s, as created by the (former) real life Home Office pathologist Professor Bernard Knight.



Published by those very civilised publishers Severn House (so civilised they have their offices in the country, not the town), Bernard Knight’s retro mystery

According to the Evidence not only has fully-fleshed characters grappling with multiple mysteries, but absolutely spot-on forensic detail as you might expect. As an added bonus, Bernard's new series (surely there will be more) form a very reader-friendly history of the development of forensic pathology and science in the UK. According to this evidence I suspect that Bernard Knight, who has already achieved national treasure status for his "Crown John" historical mysteries, has another success on his hands.

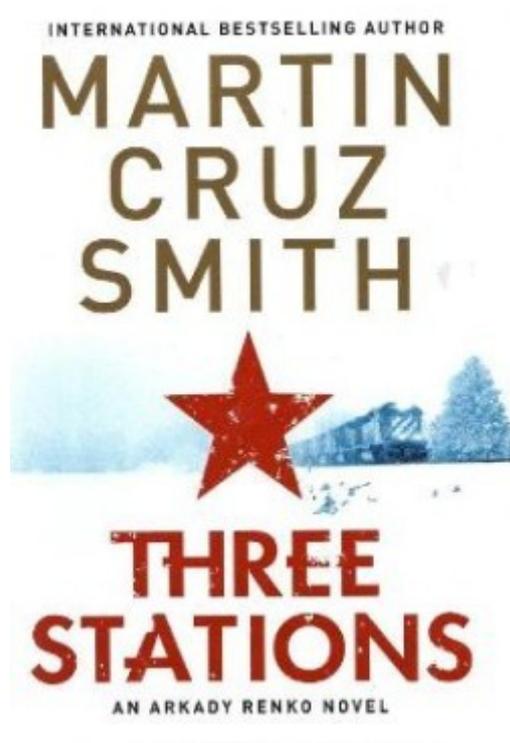
ИЗВЕСТИЯ

For the first time in living memory, the moat at Ripster Hall froze over at Christmas and the ground staff refused to man the unheated pill box which guards the main drive and is so useful when it comes to deterring carol singers.



Totally cut off from the world all I could do was broach a kilderkin of stock ale, throw a pile of bound proofs on the fire and settle down to see out the Russian winter with a good book or six. Fortunately the first three books I chose were all extremely good and, ironically, all had a Russian connection.

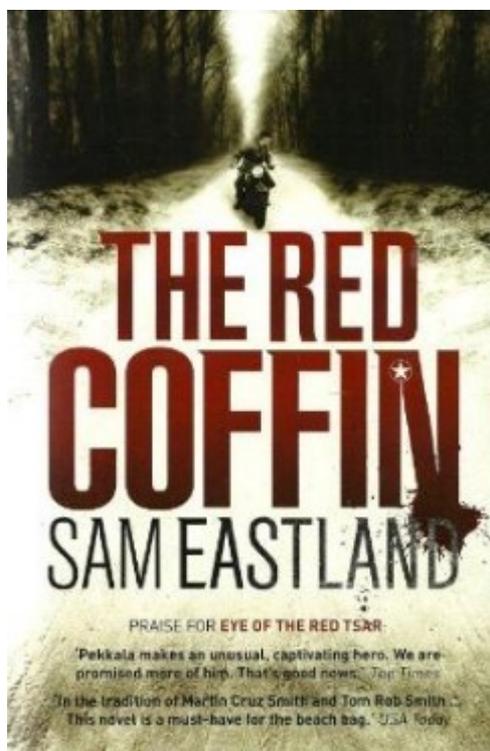
I cannot over-recommend the latest Arkady Renko mystery by Martin Cruz Smith, *Three Stations*, which is published by Mantle later this month.



Quite how Mr Smith, who I believe lives in Northern California, does it I do not know, but I am extremely jealous of the skill with which he conjures up a picture of modern Moscow, warts and all. And I do mean warts, for *Three Stations* deals with a serial killer with an artistic (or at least balletic) bent, a 15-year-old runaway mother whose baby has been stolen, gangs of feral youths, alcoholism and corruption among the forces of law

and order and the problems of being a super-rich oligarch with far too many empty casinos – oh, and don't forget the dwarf with the 9mm Makarov.....

It is, unbelievably, *thirty* years since Renko burst on the scene in *Gorky Park*. Age may have wearied him, but his creator still writes fluently and with fantastic energy, not to mention an iron-grip on his subject matter. This really is a superb thriller and one not afraid to tackle the social problems of modern Moscow, from the wasteland that is the “Three Stations” area of the title to the side-effects of sudden and grotesque wealth for the privileged few, as Arkady discovers when he drives unwittingly into a “No Lada Zone”!

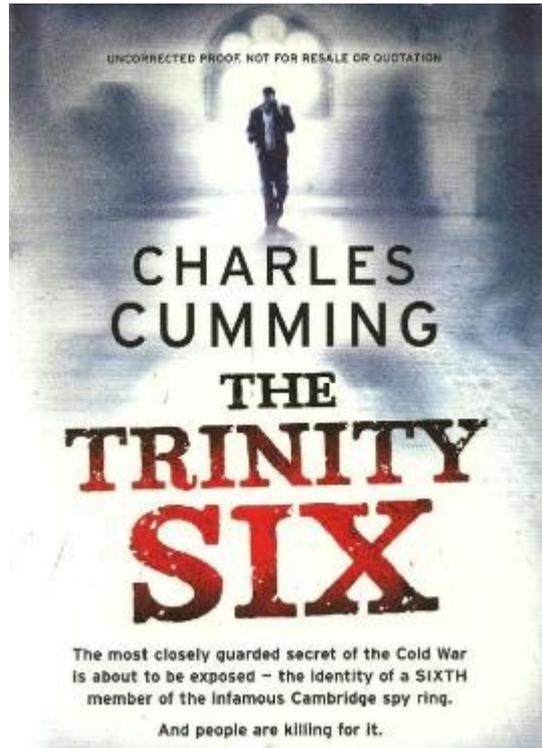


Having already jinxed the career of Sam Eastland by choosing his *Eye of the Red Tsar* as my favourite debut novel for 2010, I will probably do further damage by admitting that I have enjoyed his second, to be published by those Fabulous Faber people in February, just as much.

The Red Coffin is another case for Inspector Pekkala, formerly the very special investigator for Tsar Nicholas II and now enjoying (if that's the word) the confidence of the 'new' Tsar – Josef Stalin. The year is 1939 and the war clouds gather. Stalin pins his hopes on a new tank, the T-34, which is known as the Red Coffin to the men who have to test the prototypes. When the eccentric inventor is found murdered – after being run over by a 32-ton tank on the testing ground! – and a sinister group known as the White Guild is suspected, Pekkala is called in.

Technically, I believe Pekkala is of Finnish origin, so I suppose you could categorise this as Scandinavian crime fiction, but please don't. Pekkala is too humane a character to deserve that – and he's a gentle and warm one too, despite or perhaps because of what he himself has had to endure. And apart from a cracking plot and a well-researched setting, Eastland offers something more for he points up the fact that history isn't divided into convenient chunks. Even after undergoing extreme regime change, from feudal absolutism to equally uncompromising communism, Russian policemen continued to do their job and on reflection, there probably wasn't much difference for someone who switched employers from an autocratic Tsar to a Stalin.

My third very satisfying taste of things Russian came via the elegant pen of Charles Cumming, whom one discerning critic (probably me) has already labelled the standard-bearer for the next generation of British spy writers.



In his new novel, *The Trinity Six*, also out in February, we are not actually in Russia but we are on familiar Russian territory, tracking KGB ‘moles’ inside British Intelligence; and one in particular, who could have been the “sixth man” in the infamous Philby-Burgess-Maclean-Blunt-Cairncross ‘Cambridge spy ring’ dating back to the 1930s.

Was there a sixth man? Could he still be alive? Whose side was (is?) he really on and what on earth could be his importance, after all this time, be to the powerful, present-day leader of Russia (an ex-KGB officer whose name begins with “P”)?

Stumbling to find the answers is a naive academic Sam Gaddis, thinking he has the fixings for a bestseller but very quickly finding himself out of his depth. Thank goodness he has a super guardian angel in the shape of highly efficient female intelligence officer (of whom we surely must hear more) as he is easily outwitted by just about everyone he comes across, including a splendidly mischievous 91-year-old who may just be the sixth man in question.

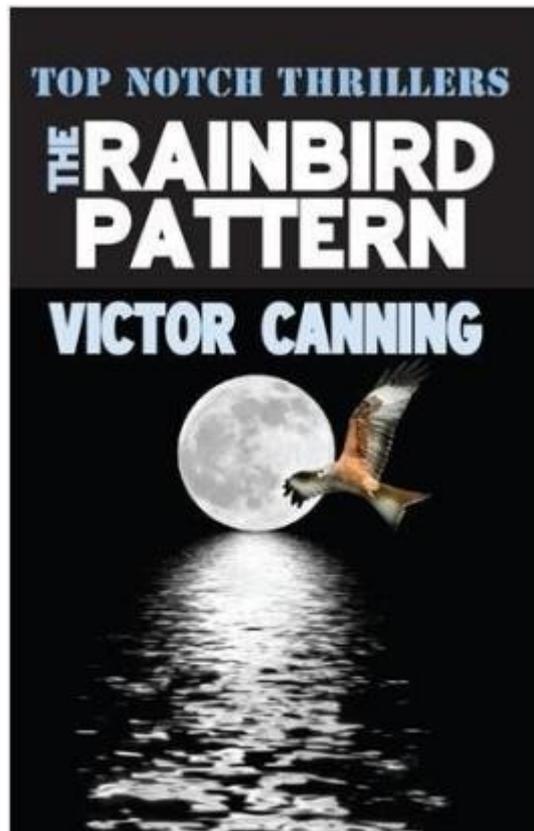
The Trinity Six is British spy fiction of the highest order, respecting all the traditions of the genre whilst updating to include modern techniques of surveillance which George Smiley would have thought downright rude.

I thought this book was a terrific read, which is really just as well. For legal reasons I had to resort to a clandestinely-acquired proof copy and had my review been at all negative, it is likely I would have faced the plutonium umbrella treatment on my next stroll across Westminster Bridge.

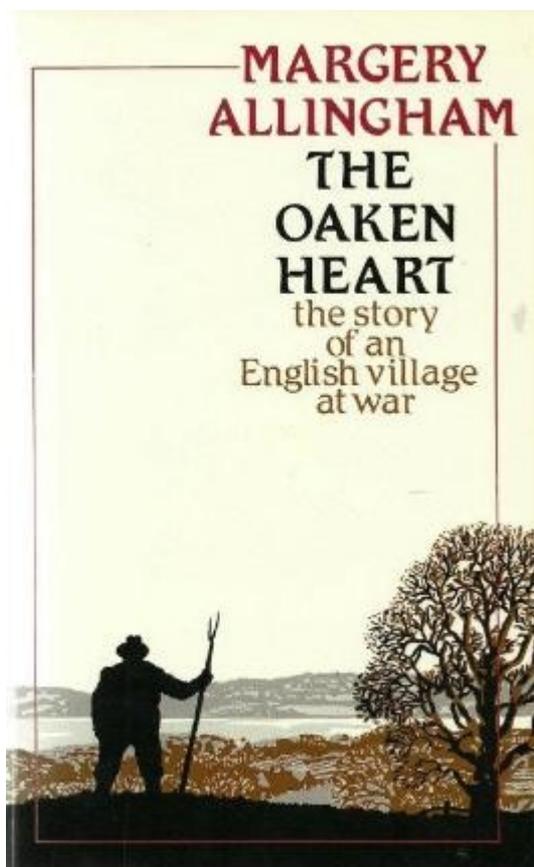
Anniversaries

There are several important anniversaries in the world of mystery fiction coming up in 2011 which should be of interest to anyone with a modicum of taste and intelligence.

This year sees the centenary of the birth of Victor Canning, who died in 1986. Canning was a prolific author with a publishing career spanning 50 years and several genres and he also wrote for television, including for series such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Mannix* and *Man in a Suitcase*. Probably his best known book, the Silver Dagger-winning thriller *The Rainbird Pattern* was recently re-issued as a Top Notch Thriller and his centenary will certainly be marked by features here in *Shots* and on the dedicated website created by John Higgins at <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/worldscape/canning/>.



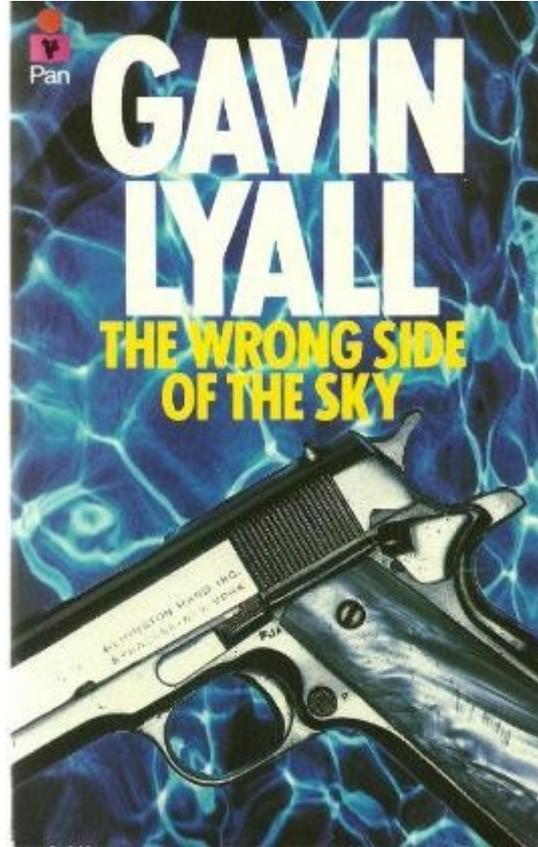
The coming year also marks the 70th anniversary of two books by one of the Queens of the ‘Golden Age’ of English crime writing, Margery Allingham, as in 1941 she not only produced one of her best thrillers, *Traitor’s Purse*, but also the non-fiction, morale-boosting description of an Essex village during wartime: *The Oaken Heart*.



Celebrations to mark the anniversary of *Oaken Heart* will take place in March and, fittingly, in Margery's home village of Tolleshunt D'Arcy, Essex as part of this year's Essex Book Festival.

And then, organised by the Margery Allingham Society, *Traitor's Purse* (in which hero Albert Campion suffers amnesia and uncovers a Nazi counterfeiting plot) will be celebrated at an event in London in July.

Amazingly, it is 50 years now since Gavin Lyall burst on the thriller scene with *The Wrong Side of the Sky*, which the *Sunday Telegraph* recommended for "those who like their blood and thunder airborne and up-to-date".



Sadly, Gavin died in 2003 and apart from his superb *Midnight Plus One*, many of his novels seem to have slipped out of print. However, I hear whispers that that disgraceful situation might soon be rectified and I for one would be particularly grateful. I was fortunate enough to know Gavin briefly and able to embarrass him on several occasions by raving about how the scene in *Midnight Plus One* where a Citroën DS is machine-gunned on the old Maginot Line must be the best description of the death of a car in crime fiction. As a result of that book, I still drive Citroëns to this day.

Good thrillers can mess with your head

The power of a good thriller to lodge deep in one's memory banks never ceases to amaze me and I was reminded of the fact over the Christmas holiday when I received an urgent telegram from my old writing colleague and fellow *boulevardier* Walter Satterthwait.

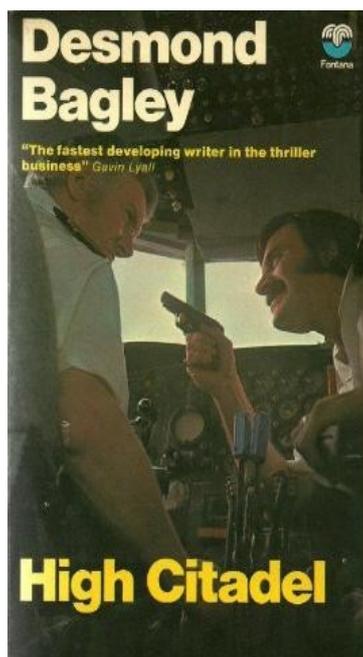
There was a time – in the last century – when Walter and I along with our "third musketeer" chum the late, great Sarah Caudwell, set the pace on the London social scene.



But those heady days when we used to make our own entertainment standing around the saloon bar juke box have long gone and whilst I have retired to the country and the daily grind of estate management, Walter has decamped with ten favourite records and a good book to his private island Crab Key in the Caribbean, which I believe is situated somewhere between Curaçao and Drambuie.



It was whilst promenading along one of his beaches that a sudden thought struck Walter. He could remember the plot of Desmond Bagley's excellent thriller *High Citadel* from 1965, where survivors from an airliner crash in the Andes have to defend themselves against bandits using medieval weapons, but could not for the life of him remember whether the heroes built an *onager*, a *trebuchet* or a *ballista*.



Naturally such things play on the intelligent mind and without a copy of the book to hand, Walter was understandably distraught until he had the presence of mind to ask me. A message in a bottle to the nearby island of Grenadine was quickly relayed to our man in Havana who then cabled my club in London, from where a motorbike messenger was despatched to Ripster Hall.

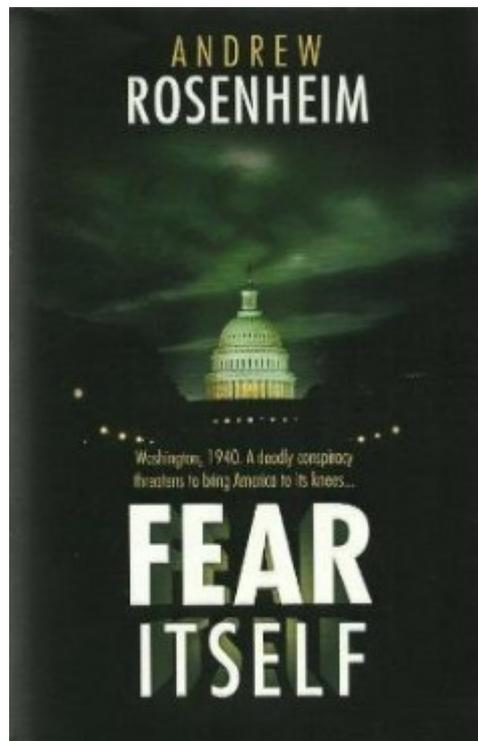
I was able to telegraph the answers immediately (the survivors actually build an *arbalest* crossbow and then a *trebuchet* to take out the baddies) and put Walter's mind at ease.

It just goes to show though, that a really good thriller written by a master craftsman such as Bagley can stick in the mind even after 40 years and I wonder how many of today's crop of bestsellers we will be saying that of in forty more years' time.

Nothing to fear but....

My New Year's Resolution is to refrain from tipping any books for any of the crime writing awards in 2011, in the conviction that this will result in more people still being willing to talk to me come the end of the year.

Suffice it to say that the first historical thriller I have read so far is *Fear Itself* and it is very good.



Written by ex-pat American Andrew Rosenheim and published by Hutchinson in February, *Fear Itself* is set in the period 1938-1940 when America seemed determined to stay out of the approaching world war. To ensure this, a long-term Nazi 'sleeper' agent is activated to assassinate President Roosevelt and the only person in a position to stop this happening is an innocent, rookie FBI agent.

Now the assassination of wartime leaders (or American Presidents) is not a new concept in fiction (think *Eagle Has Landed*, *Rogue Male*, etc.) but where *Fear Itself* scores is on its detail of the American pro-German *Bund* and of the large chunk of the American population with German roots, and particularly on the stumbling FBI as it fumbles its way to establishing a professional counter-espionage operation despite the foibles and obsessions of its all-powerful Director, J. Edgar Hoover, who is far more interested in the Reds under his bed than the Nazis at the door.

This is an intelligent thriller with lots of fascinating detail spun around real historical characters such as Hoover and his associate Clyde Tolson, the infamous Father Coughlin, FDR himself and that intrepid Canadian, the spymaster William Stephenson, as well as more humdrum titbits such as the nervousness of the young FBI agent travelling by aeroplane for the first time.

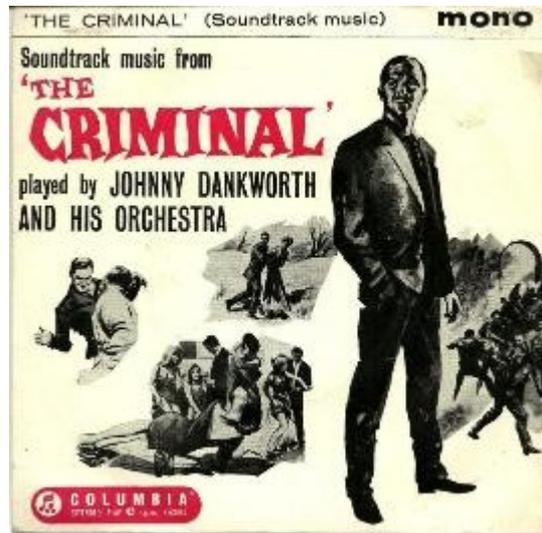
The author also, I suspects, betrays his North American origins with the sentence: 'These escapades gave both his (the President's) Secret Service and FBI minders absolute conniptions.'

Any book which teaches me the phrase "absolute conniptions" can't be all that bad and I am determined to use it in polite conversation at the earliest opportunity.

Busy New Year

My good friend Professor Barry Forshaw is limbering up for yet another busy year, his polyglot services being much in demand by publishers, television producers, Rotary Clubs, Masonic Lodges and the *Good Restaurant Guide*.

Apart from (yet) another book on certain aspects of Scandinavian crime fiction (subtitled *Who really did kill Grendel's mother?*) Professor Forshaw tells me he has a commission to write a guide to British crime films, many of which he remembers, some of which were even in colour.



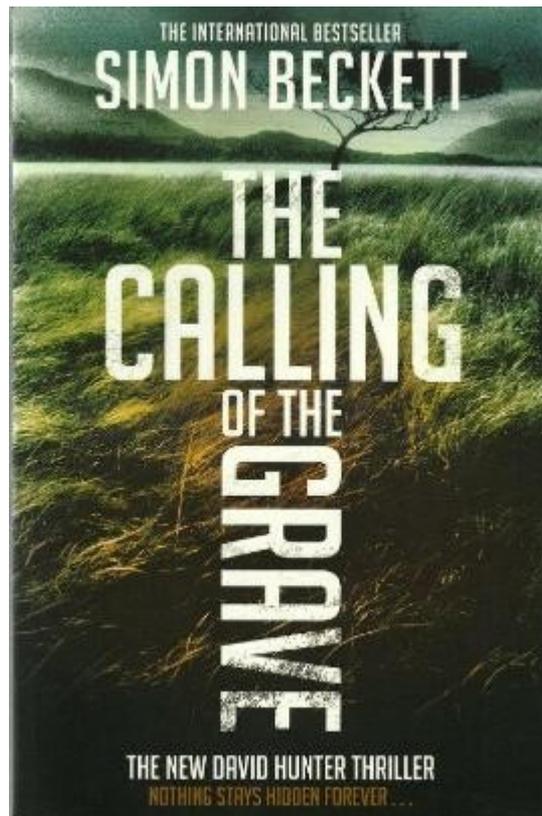
I have already put in a request that he include the 1960 Joseph Losey film *The Criminal* starring Stanley Baker, Sam Wanamaker and a platoon of British character actors, which was also known as *Concrete Jungle*. Not, of course, that I have actually seen the film myself, but I do remember buying (and still have) the “extended 45 r.p.m.” disc of the sound track by Johnny (as he was then) Dankworth.

Where would we be without a sense of humour?

Germany. It's a publishing market I have never been able to understand, though having dabbled in what is sometimes known as 'comedy crime' that should not be surprising.

Having said that, humorous (sometimes wildly funny) writers such as my old chums Douglas Lindsay, a Scot, and American Walter Satterthwait, have had success there in the past and in a more serious mood, Briton Peter James and New Zealander Paul Cleve have both scored in the *Verkaufsschlager* lists.

However, I learn from *The Sunday Times* (not a phrase I use often) that the British crime writer who has positively wowed readers not only in Germany, but also Poland, Italy and Sweden, is Simon Beckett, whose new novel featuring forensics expert David Hunter, *The Calling of the Grave*, appears from Bantam next month.



With sales of over 4,000,000 books in the last three years, *The Sunday Times* claims that this “unknown [!] UK crime writer” has outsold J.K. Rowling and Patricia Cornwell in Europe and, it adds in almost hushed tones, even Ian McEwan and Hilary Mantel.

Best Buddy

I know it is heresy in some quarters, but when it comes to the hardboiled “buddy genre” of fictional private eyes, I have always been a fan of Robert B. Parker’s Spenser/Hawk combo rather than the dynamic duo of Elvis Cole and Joe Pike as created by Robert Crais, always preferring Crais’ excellent (and often undervalued) stand-alone thrillers.

However, I am willing to be proved wrong (it always comes as a refreshing surprise) and will look forward to Robert Crais’ new novel, set in New Orleans and with Joe Pike centre-stage, *The Sentry* which is to be published by Orion in March.

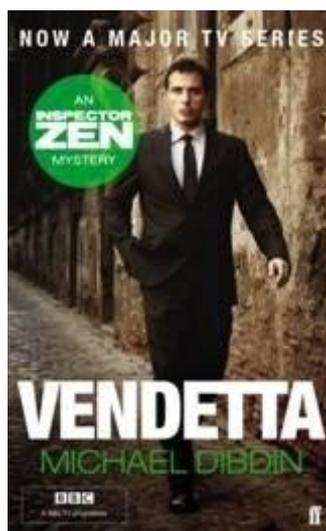
However, it will have to compete with the latest novel to feature my new favourites in the “buddy genre”, Mace Bishop and Pylon Buso, the ‘heroes’ of the Cape Town set thriller *Black Heart* by Mike Nicol.



Published by those innovative chaps and chapesses at Old Street Publishing down in glorious Devon, *Black Heart* is Mike Nicol's third thriller and puts him firmly in the vanguard – along with Deon Meyer and Roger Smith – of the new wave of South African writers, who are currently raising the bar of international standards in crime fiction.

Italian Jobs

I thoroughly enjoyed the first of the BBC's adaptations of Michael Dibdin's Aurelio Zen novels, starring Rufus Sewell. The decision to not force the mainly English cast into doing cod "whadda-mistake-to-make" Italian accents was a wise one and the stunning Italian scenery took care of itself.



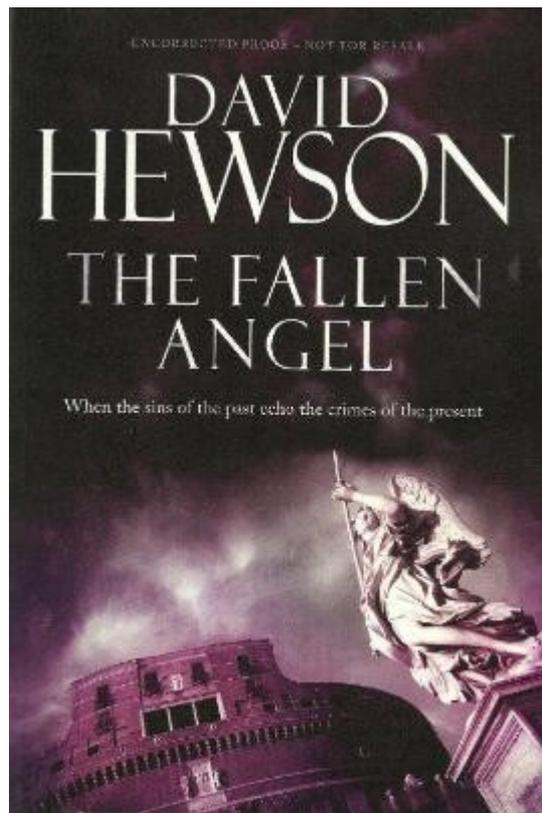
This first episode was based on the second Zen book, *Vendetta*, which I remember reviewing for the *Daily Telegraph* in 1990 during the World Cup, which just happened to be held in Italy that year (and where, by recent

standards, England did rather well). To coincide with the TV series – initially to cover three of the novels – those Fabulous Faber Boys are reissuing the Zen thrillers in appropriate covers.

Michael Dibdin died suddenly in 2007 at the frighteningly young age of 60. In all the time I knew him (about 15 years off and on), I cannot recall him talking about the idea of Aurelio Zen on television or indulging in that ever-popular game among crime writers: ‘who would you want to play....?’ On the other hand, I do remember him being quite excited when there was talk of his stand-alone satirical (and very funny) thriller *Dirty Tricks* being turned into a film directed by Mel Smith. [As it was, Mel Smith went on to direct the “Mr Bean” movie and *Dirty Tricks* became a television drama starring Martin Clunes.]

I would not dare speculate as to what Michael would have made of the production or the casting, but I am sure he would have had *an* opinion.

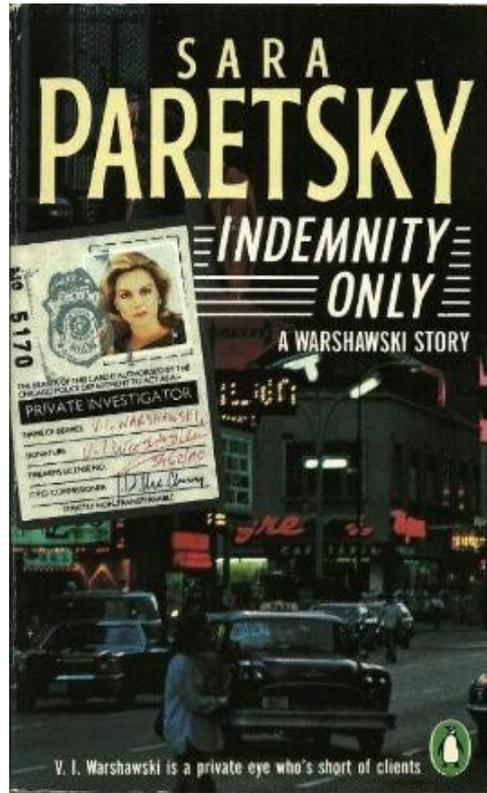
When it comes to crime novels set in Italy but written by Brits, Dibdin’s natural successor is David Hewson with his most excellent series starring the Roman detective Nic Costa, and his latest, *The Fallen Angel*, is published by Macmillan in February.



If you have never discovered Inspector Zen, well shame on you – now is the time to do so. And if you’ve not yet encountered Inspector Nic Costa; then I despair.

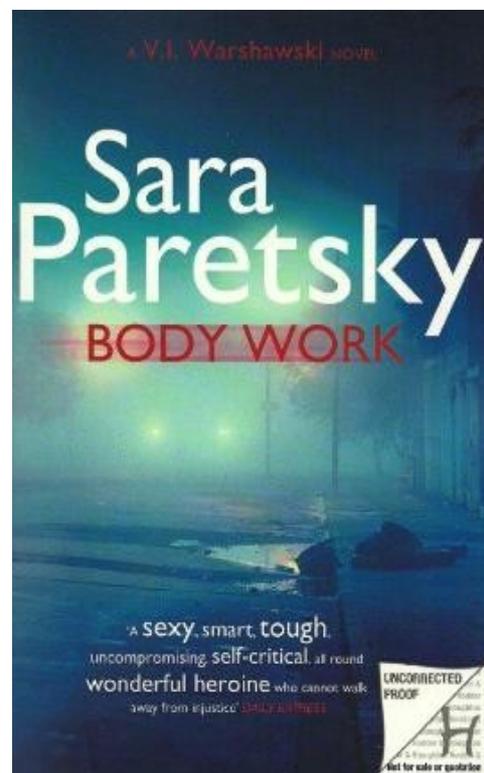
Blowing in from the Windy City

It is almost thirty years since I first encountered V.I. Warshawski, Sara Paretsky’s wonderful female private-eye and the scourge of evil and corruption in Chicago and its environs, in *Indemnity Only*.



I first met Sara Paretsky, bizarrely enough, in the wings of a concert given by crime-writer and Jewish country-and-western singer Kinky Friedman, though I was already a dedicated fan of her books. At least, that is, up to the Gold Dagger winning *Blacklist* a few years ago.

Since then – and it is no reflection at all on the books – I seem to have missed at least two in the Warshawski series and so will be making up for lost time in March when Hodder publishes the latest, *Body Work*.



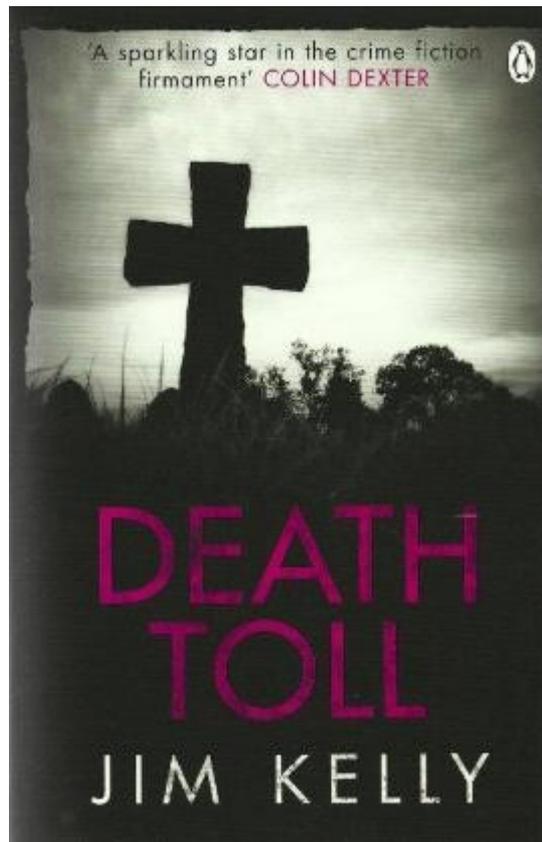
The coming year will see Sara Paretsky being named Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America (not before time) and receiving a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Bouchercon convention in St Louis.

Closer to Home

Quite why there are not more crime novels set in East Anglia baffles me, for its topography, history, archaeology and economy provide rich source material for the author. It has, as Lovejoy says in *The Grace in Older Women*, “a lurid past”.

The misty fens and wetlands, the dark forests and long shingle coast line with its muddy estuaries have of course been utilised in the past by distinguished crime writers such as Henry Wade, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, Jonathan Gash, Sheila Radley, June Thomson and in the long-running series of ‘George Gently’ novels by the late Alan Hunter (forget the current television adaption which for some reason has been transposed to Geordie-land in the 1960s and is, I believe, filmed in Ireland!).

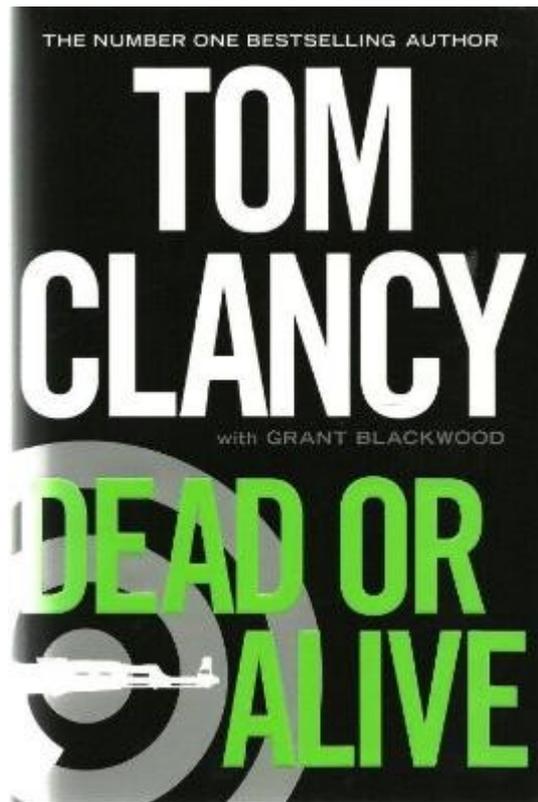
Yet in recent years, the torch-bearer when it comes to shedding light on East Anglia’s dark side is undoubtedly Jim Kelly, who lives and works in the shadow of Ely cathedral, that ‘battleship of the Fens’.



Jim’s new novel *Death Toll* [Penguin] features – as fans will be glad to hear – his police duo of Shaw and Valentine investigating a murder which begins, aptly enough, in a King’s Lynn cemetery. As with most things in that particular part of East Anglia, the investigation soon centres on a riverside pub, which just goes to prove that Jim knows his locale very well.

The Bloody Tower

For reasons of National Security, following an unfortunate misunderstanding involving a policeman’s helmet at Traitor’s Gate, I am no longer allowed in the precincts of the Tower of London. I was therefore unable to attend the flamboyant arrival of the new Tom Clancy thriller *Dead or Alive* organised by those precocious people at Penguin last month.



The spectacular launch involved copies of the new book being delivered to the Yeoman Warders of the Tower (Clancy is an honorary one) by parachute in a co-ordinated 'drop' by the famous Red Devils parachute display team.

I am assured everything went off successfully and safely despite the fact that at 950-pages in length, *Dead or Alive* weighs in at no less than 2 lbs 8 oz and all copies landed safely.

Happy New MMXI!
The Ripster