

BOOKAHOLIC

For the Mystery Addict

February 2004

Vol. 2, No. 3

Thanks to all of you who attended the 25th Street Armory Book Fair and stopped by my booth. Your support is much appreciated.

Sally Owen

WHAT I'VE BEEN READING

HIGH COUNTRY, Nevada Barr, Putnam, \$24.95

Anna Pigeon, park ranger, is under cover as a waitress at the historic Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park investigating the disappearance of four young people, all seasonal employees at the park. It isn't long before Anna realizes that the missing employees are only part of the problem and Anna must juggle waiting tables with snooping around the grounds to discover what is really going on beneath the bucolic surface of one of the country's national treasures. Barr, who was a National Parks Ranger, has created a wonderfully complex character in Anna Pigeon who has been assigned to many of this country's parks throughout this series. It is important that we suspend belief as we read – surely there aren't that many murders in those beautiful surroundings? Anna, a recovering alcoholic in her mid-forties, is a strong and resourceful woman with a rich inner life that she shares with her readers. I believe this is the twelfth book in the series and the standard remains consistently high.

HANDSOME HARRY, James Carlos Blake, Wm. Morrow, \$24.95

This fast-paced thriller which tells the story of "Handsome Harry" Pierpont, a member of the Dillinger gang. Harry was good looking, well spoken, and deadly and he died in the electric chair. Here Blake brings him back to life and does so with the easy graceful prose for which he's known. Did you know that Dillinger pronounced his name with a hard g? Blake, whom I believe is popular with readers of general fiction, does not seem to have reached mystery readers although his tales are always chock full of bad guys.

THE WELL OF LOST PLOTS, Jasper Fforde, Viking, \$24.95

This series, which follows the adventures of literary detective Thursday Next, is a favorite of mine. Thursday, apprenticed to Miss Havisham, spends much of this outing in the Character Exchange Program in the Well of Lost Plots. Scenes that made me laugh out loud were the rage counseling sessions with the characters from *Wuthering Heights* (everybody is so fed up with that prima donna Heathcliff, except, of course, for Cathy) and the description of the pesky grammasites who run off with the punctuation from

Ulysses (readers don't notice, because they never get that far into the book and those who do seem to think James Joyce is a genius). I love this creative buffoonery and I hope Fforde continues to have fun at the expense of the Western Canon.

FALLING ANGEL, William Hjortsberg, HBJ, PB, \$8.95

Whilst browsing through *Book Lust*, a fascinating list of "must-reads" by librarian Nancy Pearl, I was struck by her description of this title which has been languishing on my bookshelf for years. Pearl states that a friend described it to her as a Raymond Chandleresque private eye novel but after reading it, Pearl felt that description was misleading and became so disturbed that she couldn't sleep for days. So how could I resist? The story of Harry Angel and his search for a missing singer in 1950s New York is certainly Chandleresque and the direction the story took was most unexpected and quite fascinating, but not so disturbing that I couldn't sleep. When the book was first published in 1978 it won an Edgar Award and it is still regarded as a high spot in mystery fiction. The bad news is the book is out of print but intrepid readers will be able to find a copy.

HAVANA WORLD SERIES, Jose Latour, Grove Press, \$23.00

In the fall of 1958 all of Cuba is watching the World Series – the New York Yankees are playing the Milwaukee Braves – and large bets are being laid. Thanks to his friendship with Batista, Meyer Lansky's gambling empire is raking in millions. This does not sit well with rival Mafia boss Joe Bonanno who, with the help of some of Cuba's most ingenious criminals, hijacks the small fortune Lansky stands to gain from a Yankee win. The heist goes off brilliantly until Bonanno's point man is double-crossed and shot dead. You don't have to love baseball to enjoy this first-rate crime fiction with its cast of misfits set in a torn country on the brink of revolution.

COTTONWOOD, Scott Phillips, Ballantine, \$23.95

This third novel by Phillips is set in Kansas and is based on real crimes that occurred there during the 1870s and 1890s. The frontier town of Cottonwood is a center of sin, corruption, and murder. But it is the Bender family, a family of serial killers, who are at the center of this story. How the "Bloody Benders" are brought to justice when law enforcement was minimal and serial killing unknown in the modern sense makes for fascinating reading. Although I found the pace a little slow, Phillips is proving himself to be an interesting writer. The author of *The Ice Harvest* and *The Walkaway* has come up with something completely different.

FLASHBACK, Jenny Siler, Henry Holt, \$24.00

Eve was discovered in a ditch by the side of the road in rural France by local nuns who nursed her back to health. But the bullet lodged in her head has affected her memory and each week Eve travels to the nearest town to be treated by a psychiatrist. It is while she is on one of these trips that a car pulls up to the convent and thirty-four of the thirty-five nuns are massacred. When Eve returns she is told by the surviving nun that the men were looking for her. Eve only has a ferry ticket with Arabic letters to help her try and solve who she is and why she has such enemies. Siler writes well and, although the plot

seemed familiar (Eve discovers she is a very talented martial artist and can use guns and knives like a pro), I was caught up in Eve's story to the very end.

ON MY READING LIST

***MURDER ON THE LEVIATHAN*, Boris Akunin, Random House, \$21.95**

In Paris in 1878, the police commissioner "Papa" Gauche is investigating the brutal murder of Lord Littleby. His investigation takes him to India aboard the luxury cruise ship, *Leviathan*. Erast Fandorin is also on board, and as a murderer stalks the decks, it is only a matter of time before the talented sleuth joins forces with Gauche. I have not yet read *The Winter Queen*, the first in the Erast Fandorin series, but the reviews have been uniformly terrific. I believe Akunin's books are published in translation first in the UK. The Russian editions are, of course, the true firsts.

***THE LAST GOODBYE*, Reed Arvin, HarperCollins, \$23.95**

Jack Hammond is haunted by his past. He was once a member of a prestigious law firm but he lost his promising career when he transgressed with a female client. Now he works in a seedy office in downtown Atlanta. When his friend, a former addict and computer whiz, is found dead in his apartment with a needle in his arm, Jack is convinced that all is not as it seems. This is Arvin's second book and the word about it is good.

***PERIL*, Thomas H. Cook, Bantam, \$23.95**

Sara Labrola, a married woman haunted by shattering secrets, decides to disappear. On the streets of New York, Sara will reinvent herself but six desperate and dangerous men – each with the power to destroy her – are on her trail. Cook is a very talented writer and his plots are never less than complex and ingenious.

***THE FORGOTTEN MAN*, Robert Crais, Doubleday, \$24.95**

This title has been postponed until August.

***PARTNERS*, David Cray, Carroll & Graf, \$25.00**

When Jorge "Finito" Rakowski is released from Rikers Island after serving ninety days for Criminal Mischief in the Fourth Degree, he is only a thief. Nine months, thirteen victims, and several aliases later, Finito has become a serial killer. David Cray once again explores the ambitions and betrayals among New York City's police detectives at the same time that he explores the darker side of the criminal mind. This series by Cray is a good one that is growing, I believe, in popularity.

***MEDUSA*, Michael Dibdin, Pantheon, \$23.00**

A group of Austrian cavers exploring abandoned military tunnels in the Italian Alps comes across human remains at the bottom of a deep shaft. It is assumed that the death was accidental until the body is stolen from the morgue and the Defense Ministry puts a news blackout on the case. Aurelio Zen, whom we once feared dead but who Dibdin

wisely resurrected, investigates a case which leads him into both the murky history of postwar Italy and the obscure corners of modern-day society.

***THE PISTOL POETS*, Victor Gischler, Delacorte Press, \$22.95**

When a drug lord's lieutenant from one of St. Louis's toughest ghettos decides it's time to make a new life for himself, fate delivers the perfect opportunity. Harold Jenks swaps identities with a kid bound for Eastern Oklahoma University, but how is he going to shape up as the new graduate assistant in the English Department's teaching lab? Meantime visiting professor Jay Morgan has a problem. There's a dead student in his bed and if he doesn't make her disappear fast he's going to have more explaining to do than even a tenured professor can reasonably handle. By the author of Edgar-nominated *Gun Monkeys*.

***BLOOD HOLLOW*, William Kent Krueger, Atria Books, \$24.00**

The corpse of a teenage girl is discovered four months after her disappearance on New Year's Eve and all evidence points to her boyfriend, Solemn Winter Moon. Cork O'Connor, Aurora's half-Irish, half Native American former sheriff, is convinced the boy is innocent and encounters all kinds of adversity trying to clear his name. But when Solemn claims to have seen a vision of Jesus Christ in Blood Hollow, the mystery deepens. And that's when the miracles start happening. I'm not sure, from that description, where this story is going, but I do know that this series set in Minnesota is consistently good and that Krueger deserves more attention.

***SUNSET AND SAWDUST*, Joe R. Lansdale, Knopf, \$22.00**

Once again Lansdale sets his murder mystery in Depression-era East Texas. Sunset Jones has just killed her husband who was raping her. In the small mill town of Camp Rapture no woman refuses her husband, so everyone is angrily surprised when, thanks to the amazing understanding of her mother-in-law who owns three quarters of the mill, Sunset not only escapes punishment but takes her husband's job as constable of the settlement. Her first case is the murders of a woman and her unborn baby in which her late husband might be implicated. Lansdale is an interesting writer and I'm fascinated to see how the story of Sunset plays out in a time when women were supposed to know their place.

***THE RETURN OF THE DANCING MASTER*, Henning Mankell, New Press, \$24.95**

It is December 12th, 1945 and Nazi Germany lies in ruins as a British warplane lands in Buckeburg. A man carrying a black bag disembarks and travels to the prison at Hameln. Early the next day, nine male and three female war criminals are hanged. Fifty-four years later, retired policeman Herbert Molin is found slaughtered on his remote farm in Sweden. On the floor are tracks in the blood – as if somebody had been practicing the tango. Stefan Lindman, a young police officer on sick leave, hears about the murder of his former colleague and decides to investigate. This author is hotter and than hot these days, and it is about time (see COLLECTING). He has, here, taken a break from his Kurt Wallander series. This title was published first in the UK.

THE BONE PARADE, Mark Nykanen, Hyperion, \$24.95

Ashley Stassler is not your average artist. He is a very successful one, much praised for his series of bronze sculptures that group families together, depicting them in excruciating physical and emotional pain. His work is known by numbers and he's up to #9. Family #9 are in for cruelty and savagery beyond imagination, and all for the sake of art. Nykanen, who was an investigative reporter and then press secretary for Jerry Brown of California, has written one other book, the psychological thriller *Hush*.

LAW OF RETURN, Rebecca Pawel, Soho Press, \$24.00

The Spanish Civil War is over and Carlos Tejada has been promoted to lieutenant in the Guardia Civil and transferred to Salamanca. His new duties include monitoring parolees, former professors fired for protesting a Franco decree. Elena Fernandez who lost her job because of her political sympathies is in Salamanca when her father, one of the parolees, receives a letter from a Jewish friend begging for help to cross into Spain from France before he is forcibly repatriated to Germany. Professor Fernandez cannot violate his parole but Elena can help. Her path will cross Tejada's with whom she was once romantically involved. I haven't yet read the first book in this series, *Death of a Nationalist*, and I think that might have been an oversight.

THE QUESTION OF BLOOD, Ian Rankin, Little Brown, \$22.95

The latest Rebus mystery finds him investigating the murders of two 17-year-old students at an elite Edinburgh boarding school. He's also under suspicion for the murder of a man who had been menacing his partner and friend Detective Sergeant Siobhan Clarke. Those of you who have already read the UK edition report that this is one of Rankin's best.

PLAYING WITH FIRE, Peter Robinson, Wm. Morrow, \$23.95

Inspector Banks investigates arson when two barges moored side-by-side on an English canal go up in flames and their owners are killed. But when another fire claims a third life, Banks and Annie Cabot dig into the victims' pasts to find the connection. Here's a quandary for the collector. Peter Robinson was born in England and sets his Inspector Banks mysteries there. However, he now lives in Canada and the Canadian edition of his books are often the first but the UK and the US editions are never far behind. If I were collecting Robinson I would probably seek out the Canadian edition, but with a heavy heart. Those of you who do not collect don't have to give that a moment's thought. This series is quite wonderful.

A DEATH IN VIENNA, Daniel Silva, Putnam, \$25.95

Gariel Allon, art restorer, is sent to Vienna to authenticate a painting but his real mission is to find out why an agency that deals with unfinished Holocaust business has been bombed. Allon, a spy for Israel, sees a photograph and recognizes the man who brutalized his mother in the last days of World War II during the Death March from Auschwitz. This series by Silva has continued to get better with each outing.

FIRST MYSTERIES

***THE CLOUD ATLAS*, Liam Callanan, Delacorte Press, \$22.95**

This thriller is based on a true story. During World War II, Japan launched thousands of bomb-laden balloons at North America, a military action that marked the deployment of the world's first intercontinental warheads. This is the backdrop to the story of Louis Belk, a young bomb disposal sergeant is sent on a top secret mission to Anchorage to chase down these improbable weapons.

***INAMORATA*, Joseph Gangemi, Viking, \$24.95**

Spirituality was all the rage in the 1920s attracting the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini. The media embraced this national obsession with the paranormal and in 1922, *Scientific American* offered \$5,000 for conclusive evidence of "psychic manifestations." Against that backdrop, this story follows Martin Finch, a Harvard graduate student and member of *Scientific American's* investigative committee, as he tries to expose Mina Crawley, a well-known psychic in Philadelphia, as a fraud. Instead, the young man of science finds himself falling under the spell of Crawley and uncovering a truth darker than any he could have expected.

***THE INTELLIGENCER*, Leslie Silbert, Atria Books, \$24.00**

Kate Morgan takes a job at a private investigation firm that doubles as a U.S. intelligence unit. There she meets Cidro Medina who has discovered a mysterious manuscript that has been buried for centuries and which someone, somewhere, is desperate to steal. Cidro wants Kate to figure out why. Meanwhile, we go deep into Christopher Marlowe's doomed final days and wonder how the secret in Medina's manuscript connects with Marlowe's sudden death. This debut novel moves between Elizabethan England and present-day Manhattan, London, and Italy as Kate tires to unravel the mystery.

NON-MYSTERIES OF NOTE

***SHANGHAI STATION*, Bartle Bull, Carroll & Graf, \$26.00**

This historical adventure takes place in Shanghai in 1918. Revolution is in the air and Jessica James, the rebellious daughter of American missionaries, is being used by the ruthless Russian commissar Viktor Polyak. But from another Russia comes well-born Alexander Karlov who arrives in Shanghai with a mission. The Bolsheviks have brutally killed his mother and abducted his twin sister. Bull is the author of *The White Rhino Hotel*, *A Café on the Nile*, and *The Devil's Oasis*, all set in Africa. I expect this story of intrigue to be a real page turner.

***THE BIRTH OF VENUS*, Sarah Dunant, Random House, \$24.95**

Dunant, who is the creator of Hannah Wolfe, private eye, has turned to historical fiction here. Alessandra Cecchi, a fifteen-year-old is fascinated by the young painter her father brings back from northern Europe to decorate the chapel walls in the family's Florentine

palazzo. Meanwhile, Florence has become a battleground between the reactionary followers of Savonarola, the fundamentalist monk and the Medici family with its love of luxury and the arts.

***WATERBORNE*, Bruce Murkoff, Knopf, \$25.00**

Set in the Great Depression when the nation, crippled by poverty and despair, needed a transformation, Waterborne tells the stories of three very different people, all drawn to a vast construction site in the Nevada desert, the Hoover Dam, the greatest engineering project of its time.

NEWS FROM THE UK

***WHITE SKIN MAN*, John Baker, Orion**

Katy Madika, a photographer, is fascinated by the dark, hook-nosed man on the sunlit dock where she is taking photographs. Her camera is the only witness to his murder. Not a Sam Turner mystery I'm guessing.

***GHOSTHEART*, Roger Jon Ellery, Orion**

Annie O'Neill has a cosy Manhattan apartment, a beautiful bookshop, and a network of supportive friends, but she still misses the father she lost when she was young. When a man enters her shop claiming to be her father's dearest friend, Annie jumps at the chance of finding out more about her own past. But the man seems more interested in telling her a story about a fifty-year-old betrayal, a betrayal that Annie realizes has something to do with her. Ellery's second book.

***PETRIFIED*, Barbara Nadel, Headline**

The disappearance of two children deeply concerns Inspector Cetin Ikmen, but even more worrying is that their own family members can't seem to agree when and where they were last seen. Is the family covering up, and why? I expect this series, set in Istanbul, to take off once Nadel's first book in the series, *Belshazzar's Daughter*, is published here. That should be at any moment.

***LIKE A CHARM*, Karin Slaughter, Ed., Century**

An anthology of stories by crime writers, all of whom use the same charm bracelet in their stories. Slaughter is an American, and this anthology will be published here, but it looks as if the UK edition will be first.

***PECKING ORDER*, Chris Simms, Hutchinson**

Roy Bull works on a chicken farm all the while dreaming of a life in the Army despite being rejected. When a mysterious stranger turns up, gullible Roy is soon employed on a sinister secret project. His only confidante is a telephone fortune-teller. How disturbing must Roy's revelations be before the fortune-teller is prepared to take action? Second book by the author of *Outside the White Lines*.

THIS AND THAT

The Whitbread Prize in the UK is awarded in several different categories. Then a prize is given to one of those books as Book of The Year. The Book of the Year is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by **Mark Haddon**.

COLLECTING

Henning Mankell writes a series featuring Swedish Inspector Kurt Wallander, a tired man whose health seems to be in a continual state of deterioration. Wallander investigates crimes in a country once known to be peaceful, even utopian, but which now deals with inequality, immigration, racism, and violence. It is this breakdown of the law in his native country which Mankell explores so well while Wallander solves the most gruesome crimes. Mankell lived for thirty years in Africa and he incorporates a murder plot against Nelson Mandela in his book, *The White Lioness*. Mankell is one of the hardest writers to collect in English translation (true firsts are Swedish) because print runs, up until now, have been small and there is some controversy about which editions are the “true firsts.” So let’s start with what we know.

Mankell has written nine Kurt Wallander mysteries, of which seven have been translated into English. They are, in the order in which he wrote them:

Faceless Killers
The Dogs of Riga
The White Lioness
Sidetracked
The Fifth Woman
One Step Behind
Firewall

All are excellent but *The Dogs of Riga* and *The White Lioness* are considered denser, more political, harder to get into. *Sidetracked* is considered one of his best books and, like most of his books, has been honored with many awards.

Here’s where it gets tricky. *The Dogs of Riga* is a UK first, all other titles are US first editions. However, *Faceless Killers* is the title in dispute. There are those who believe that the UK edition was first, but just as many believe it to be a US first edition. You would think this could be easily checked, and having both editions at hand might help, but so far I do not have a definitive answer. Maybe between us we can solve this.

BOOKS OF THE MONTH

Fiction

Aird, Catherine, *Chapter and Hearse*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. Seventeen short stories featuring DCI C.D. Sloan and his assistant Cosby as well as Malcolm Venables of the Secret Service.

Andrews, Donna, *We'll Always Have Parrots*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. Meg Langslow and her fiancée travel to a fan convention for "Porfira, Queen of the Jungle." There are plenty of suspects when the star is murdered but Meg thinks the police are going to arrest the wrong one.

Atherton, Nancy, *Aunt Dimity Snowbound*, Viking, \$22.95. Lori Shepherd is stranded in Laythorne Abbey during a blizzard where she learns of a plot to steal a priceless heirloom from the owners. Enter Aunt Dimity.

Barnard, Robert, *A Cry From the Dark*, Scribner, \$24.00. Bettina Whitelaw is a renowned author in her eighties living in London. As she works on her memoir, her home is burgled. Bettina does not know what she has that this burglar seems intent on finding but the puzzle, at first mildly disturbing, soon turns deadly serious.

Beaton, M.C., *Death of a Poison Pen*, Mysterious Press, \$23.95. Poison pen letters lead to murder in this new Hamish Macbeth mystery.

Bernhardt, William, *Hate Crime*, Ballantine, \$25.95. Ben Kincaid is asked to defend a man who beat and stabbed a gay man and left him to die. Ben says no, but he can't get away from the case.

Borthwick, J.S., *Intensive Scare Unit*, St. Martin's, \$24.95. Julia Clancy is in the hospital after suffering a heart attack. She's already a witness in a murder case but she's nearly strangled to death during what she thought was a late night check-up.

Daniel, David, *Goofy Foot*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. Private investigator Alex Rasmussen is searching for a missing teenager. This simple task balloons into a heart-stopping search for a killer.

Depoy, Phillip, *The Witch's Grave*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. Fever Devilin, noted folklorist and academic, investigates murder in the Georgia Appalachian mountain region.

Dickinson, David, *Death of an Old Master*, Carroll & Graf, \$24.00. Murder, forgery, and fraud take special investigator Lord Francis Powerscourt into a dangerous Victorial underworld of art.

Dorsey, Tim, *Cadillac Beach*, Wm. Morrow, \$24.95. Serge Storms, psychopathic serial killer and hero of this strange and loony series, travels back to the sixties to find out how his grandfather died.

Green, Tim, *The First 48*, Warner Books, \$24.95. A father will do anything to find his missing daughter, including kidnapping the U.S. Senator he believes abducted her.

Grisham, John, *????*, Doubleday, \$27.95. We don't know the plot and we don't know the title, but we do know the price and we do know it will be a bestseller.

Hall, Oakley, *Ambrose Bierce and the Trey of Pearls*, Viking, \$24.95. Ambrose Bierce and Tom Redmond try to uncover the darker side of three young suffragists known as the Trey of Pearls who have the men of San Francisco in a lather of desire and defiance.

Hall, Patricia, *Death in Dark Waters*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. DCI Michael Thackeray investigates violence at a popular night-club that may be related to both drugs and a local mosque.

Hess, Joan, *Muletrain to Maggody*, Scribner, \$23.00. The latest Arly Hanks mystery. Previously announced.

Jacobs, Mark, *A Handful of Kings*, Scribner, \$24.00. Vicky Sorrell is about to leave the foreign service, but a well-known American writer makes a request that draws her into the murky world of terrorists and spies.

Klavan, Laurence, *The Cutting Room*, Ballantine, \$23.95. Edgar Award-winning author Klavan sets his new novel in the world of the movies as the protagonist hunts for the long-lost and never-released complete print of Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

Macpherson, Rett, *In Sheep's Clothing*, St. Martin's, \$23.95. A mysterious 150-year-old diary reveals an ancient murder. Genealogist Torie O'Shea is fascinated by this mystery passed down through generations.

Nelscott, Kris, *Stone Cribs*, St. Martin's, \$24.95. In 1969 Chicago, Smokey Dalton saves the life of a young woman after a botched illegal abortion but this act becomes a very complicated situation for Smokey.

Shannon, Ray, *Firecracker*, Putnam, \$23.95. A tale of murder, greed, and girl power set on the Last Vegas strip. Shannon is a pseudonym for Gar Anthony Haywood.

Thomas, Scarlett, *In Your Face*, Justin Charles, \$24.95. Lily receives a troubling call from her friend Jess, a journalist for the true-life magazine, Smile! Jess has written a feature on three women who were victims of stalking and on the day of publication, all three women are found murdered.

White, Stephen, *Blinded*, Delacorte Press, \$24.95. Psychologist Alan Gregory hears a shocking confession and must choose between saving himself and saving those who might end their days at the hands of a vicious serial killer.

Non-Fiction

Frey, James N., *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery*, St. Martin's, \$22.95. What to do, and what not to do, to get a mystery written and published.

the manager of The Mysterious Bookshop in New York City from 1996 to 2002
Sally Owen is a book dealer and was. You can reach her via e-mail: sallyowen@verizon.net.
Or via mail:
Sally Owen
1825 Foster Avenue, Apt. 2J
Brooklyn, NY 11230
Phone: 718-434-1705