

# MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

N°01 - WINTER 2020

MAGAZINE

## POLICE PROCEDURAL TROPES

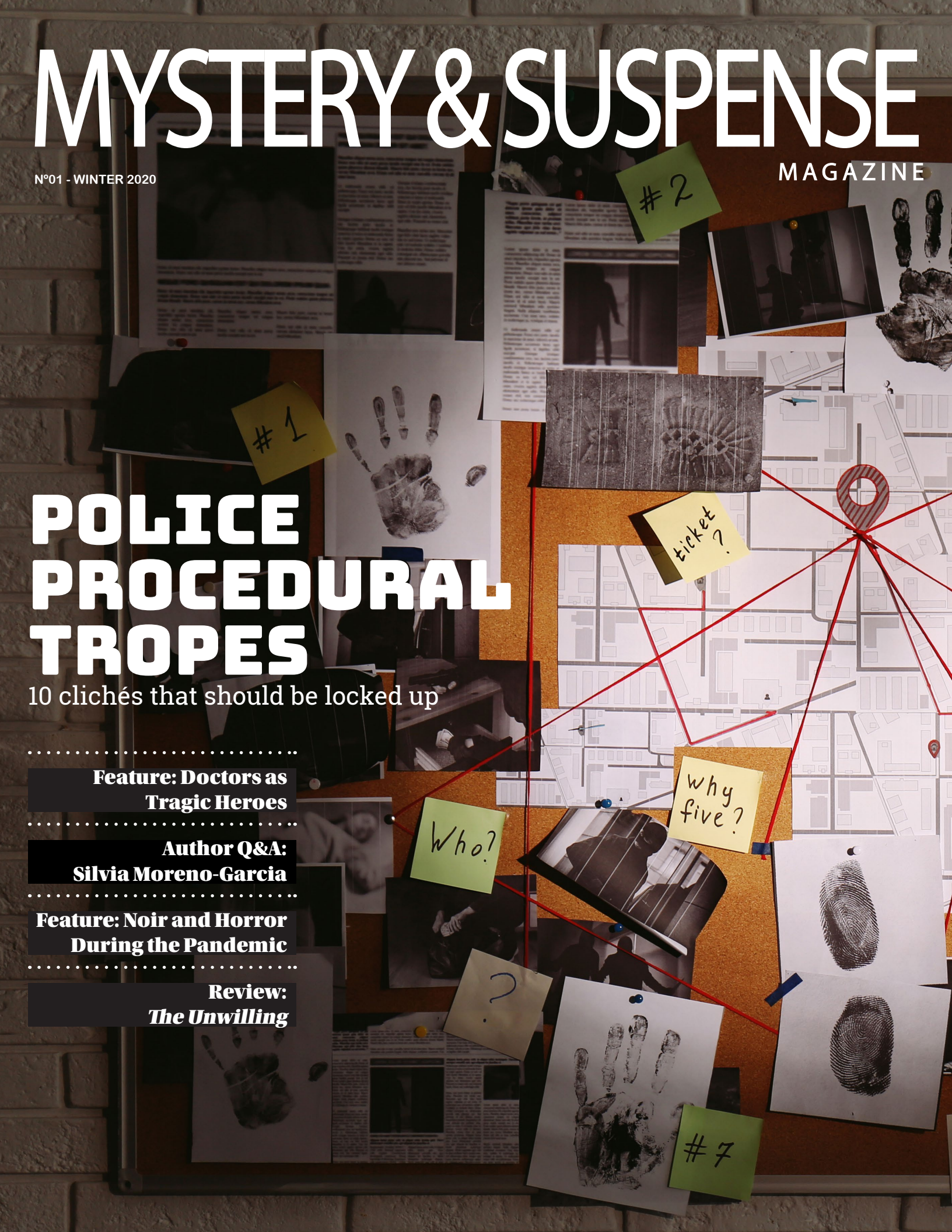
10 clichés that should be locked up

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**Mystery & Suspense Magazine**  
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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

Our inaugural edition features the best content from our last quarter



**Sam Boush**  
Editor-in-Chief

**W**elcome to *Mystery and Suspense Magazine's* inaugural edition, Winter 2020. Founded earlier in the whirlwind that is this pandemic year, we've persevered and worked hard to supply lovers of mysteries, thrillers, crime, horror, and suspense with fresh and spine-tingling content. Hopefully, you've enjoyed reading as much as we've enjoyed putting this together.

It's been a labor of love, most of all through contributions from more than one hundred reviewers, feature writers, authors, and our production editor, Tehra Peace. From their contributions we've pulled out some of the best of the last quarter to fill these pages.

A quarterly, though, comes out only every . . . well, you know. And while there's lots more content on [MysteryandSuspense.com](http://MysteryandSuspense.com) we wish we could have included, it's content which you, dear reader, can peruse at your leisure. Probably, you already have.

As a closing thought, I encourage you to reach out to me through our Contact Us page to suggest an author we might consider interviewing, a recent or upcoming book we should review, a topic we could expand on in an article, or really anything else.

Thank you for reading! And keep your eyes on [MysteryandSuspense.com](http://MysteryandSuspense.com) for big changes coming in 2021.

All the best,  
**Sam**



# A MODERN-DAY TRAGIC HERO

## Doctors as tragic heroes in medical crime thrillers

The tragic doctor is particularly jarring when we face the startling realization that the process of creating one of society's most trusted positions might be flawed.

**D**r. Duntch, the real-life neurosurgeon who intentionally maimed his patients on the operating table, was not a good person. Walter White was also not exactly an upstanding citizen. Macbeth, the murderous Scottish upstart to the throne—lots of room for improvement.

While the hero's journey through adversity may be a compelling story, there's a reason the hit show was called *Breaking Bad* and not *Staying Good*. The same holds for Macbeth, chosen rather than Scotland's actual hero, Macduff. The tragic hero has become one of the most engaging characters in literature, taking on alternative forms as the genre grows. But there is one tragic hero more seductive and insatiable than we as readers can ever stop thinking about: the tragic doctor.

### WHAT IS A TRAGIC HERO?

First, for clarity, the tragic hero is defined by the subversion of the classic hero's journey, opening the story up to a messy and morally ambiguous arc of self-destruction. The tragic hero is supposed to be virtuous—destined to be the paragon. But somewhere along their journey, the tragic hero makes that one fateful mistake that derails their course trajectory from reliable hero to reviled underdog. The classic mustachioed caped villain has undergone a modern transformation into a multi-dimensional character with their own distorted and tangential progression.

Readers once accustomed to cheering for the protagonist have expanded their tastes to the tragic hero. This is because sometimes virtue appears boring. Morality can be a buzzkill. It's why, as readers, we particularly love the medical crime thriller. We stand as spectators, yelling at the pages as the doctor makes one incremental mistake after another, descending into madness of her or his own hubris. Why do we love reading these characters so much? Why do we yearn to watch the fall from grace of healthcare professionals, pushed from their pedestal and plunged to the criminal underworld?

Before we explore what makes doctors such compelling tragic heroes, it's important to explore what exactly makes the tragic hero so page-turning in the first place.

### CAN WE BECOME A TRAGIC HERO?

A dehumanizing process occurs when a person commits tabloid-worthy acts. When we read about Doctor Death or the Craglist Killer in the news, they appear dehumanized as we grasp to understand why they commit such repugnant acts. The story of the tragic hero provides a look behind the curtain, exposing universal human frailty. Once we learn the origin story of the tragic hero, we understand the microprocesses that churn within them: the hubris, the white lies, the sins of omission, the rationalizations, and the cognitive dissonance. With understanding comes dreadful insight: they're more like us than we'd like to believe.

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**“Readers once accustomed to cheering for the protagonist have expanded their tastes to the tragic hero. It's why, as readers, we particularly love the medical crime thriller.”**



.....  
**“A really well-written tragic hero will continuously push the reader’s moral envelope. Just after we believe they cannot sink any lower, their course corrections usually make matters even worse.”**

It’s revelatory to discover the corrupting processes that can happen within ourselves. We are knocked down from our lofty pedestal as sanctimonious readers, reflecting on our own potential for wrong-doing.

**HOW DO WE PREVENT THE TRAGIC HERO?**

The tragic hero is a model of destruction. With morbid fascination, we read about the tragic hero perverting codified morals and crossing ethical barriers. Knowing that most tragic heroes begin their journey in a moral station similar to the reader, we are faced with a question: what safeguards are in place? What is the calculus that ping-ponged the tragic hero from one misstep to the next? How does a person go from a loving father to a drug lord? How does a person begin as an accomplished surgeon to serving a life sentence? We like to believe that they harbor nefarious instincts, and maybe some do. But it’s also worth asking a pertinent question: what are the safeguards that prevent me from turning into Walter White? The tragic hero helps us to not only pinpoint the character flaws, but also the safeguards in our own lives that prevent our own personal tragedy.

**HOW IS THE TRAGIC HERO MADE?**

Is sociopathy inborn or installed? If you put the tragic hero’s brain into an fMRI, is there a specific spot that lights up? Or did the tragic hero lack nurturing parental figures while suffering abuse, neglect, abandonment, and trauma? We know the answer in real life is much more complicated than the false binary of “nature vs. nurture.” To reduce human behavior to a sum of their upbringing, trauma and genetic

proclivities is likely a gross oversimplification. When we read a deftly written tragic hero, not only do we explore these concepts, but we relish in the complexity of human behavior. Our empathy expands when we learn about the series of seemingly unrelated events, habits, hopes, and horrors that drives individual decision making. Reading the tragic hero helps us to not only see the humanity in them, but also serves as a cautionary tale to ourselves and our potential to become our own tragic heroes. The moral of the tragic hero is clear: it doesn’t matter who you are; tomorrow, you could be the headline.

**CAN THE TRAGIC HERO BE REDEEMED?**

The tragic hero forces us into a morbid standoff: We want them to pay for what they have done . . . but we are also kind of rooting them on. A really well-written tragic hero will continuously push the reader’s moral envelope. Just after we believe they cannot sink any lower, their course corrections usually make matters even worse. Whether it’s lying to loved ones or covering up from an employer, the tragic hero becomes more unscrupulous as they seek self-preservation. We enjoy the degeneration because we want to know something: how far can the tragic hero go before our moral standards deem them unworthy of redemption?

The more compelling the tragic hero, the more difficult it is to answer this question. While the tragic hero can never restore what they were at the beginning of their downfall, redemption can take on new forms. That is why we keep reading, not because they can restore what they lost, but because we want to believe that some form of redemption is always available, no matter what someone has done.

When we take everything we love about the tragic hero and mix that with a healthcare professional, we enter a higher echelon of tragedy that has made the medical crime thriller one of the best venues for the tragic hero. So, what is it specifically about medical crime thrillers that make them so compelling?

**THE HEALTHCARE HEROES**

Healthcare workers are the real-life exemplars of heroism. Nurses, EMS responders, ER docs, surgeons, oncologists—all of these people are the bastion of protecting human health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, how many images have we seen on the news of exhausted healthcare workers, armed with masks and gloves, crumpled in a hallway corner overcome with exhaustion? For how many years have doctors enjoyed a boundless reverence for their practice? There is a built-in narrative of self-sacrifice and compassion that permeates the entire medical field.

And this works out perfectly for the reader because doctors are a fantastic template for the tragic hero. It requires fascinating forces of folly and hubris to make a doctor violate the social contract that they should hold sacred. The American doctor tackles an arduous journey through four years of undergraduate school, four years of medical school, and anywhere from three to ten years of residency or fellowship before she or he even begins practice. The staggering amount of professional accomplishment carries an implied social contract: you can trust your doctor.

For better or worse, there is implicit trust in doctors since we believe that creating a doctor is a moral vetting process in and of itself. With this trust, doctors exercise vast influence over a person’s mind and body. Just think about what I do for a living (when I’m not writing books) as an anesthesiologist. I give patients the world’s most powerful narcotics, chemically paralyze them while taking over their heart and lungs as a surgeon applies blades, saws, and sutures to their unconscious bodies. It takes an astronomical amount of trust for doctors to even do what they do, which primes them to be in the

elevated position as the destined hero, ready for the plunge into tragedy.

With trust comes vulnerability, and with that vulnerability comes the potential for exploitation. The potential for wrongdoing is limitless: narcotic diversion, drug abuse, falsifying medical records, insurance fraud, embezzlement, and most horrifically, the violation of a patient’s mind or body. A doctor can commit egregious acts with impunity for a very long time because their position of trust confers unwritten immunity. Yet, the scrutiny of employers and patients can and does catch up to a criminal doctor. Imagine what such a doctor would do to prevent from being caught. To what extent would a doctor go to cover up their crimes? When a person has as much social capital as a doctor, they will go to extreme measures to maintain that status, often more so than someone who is not a doctor.

**THE TRAGIC DOCTOR**

Enter the literary tragic-hero doctor. A doctor meets the criteria of the would-be paragon of justice, destined for greatness and an agent of equanimity. And just like any other tragic hero, the tragic doctor starts that gradual decline from a place of high esteem. A departure from the classic tragic hero is that the white lies and rationalizations of the tragic doctor can have devastating impacts. The mistakes and course correction of a tragic doctor can ripple far into a community in the form of data breaches, privacy violations, drug trafficking, and emotional and bodily harm. The dehumanization of the tragic doctor is particularly jarring because of the contrast with their elevated position in our non-fictional society.

Considering the position that doctors are in, the tragic doctor offers the reader a cornucopia of new motivations. Compared to the typical tragic hero, a tragic doctor likely has enormous tectonic forces, both personal and professional, that force their dissent. And if indeed the tragic doctor has sociopathic tendencies, we consider the startling realization that the process of creating one of society’s most trusted positions might be flawed. We

can vet all we like, but there is a certain unsailable fact about human nature. People can easily hide who they truly are. The merits of education, professionalism, and career accomplishments are limited as social safeguards. In fact, the more esteem and positions of power one attains, the easier they can break bad and become a tragic hero. The tragic doctor is a prime example of the corruption of power and the erosion of social safeguards. To learn about the forces that lead a doctor from trusted healer to criminal is an incredible spectacle that serves as a repudiation about social trust and responsibility.

As we watch the safeguards around the tragic doctor erode, we ask, what created this monster? Are there undue moral forces on a doctor that tipped them beyond their safeguards and onto the highway of rationalization? It’s true that doctors can experience extreme stressors: end of life care, high-pressure emergencies, performance anxiety with a person’s life in the balance. Given that the tragic doctor may have more external pressures than the average individual, does this make their tragic actions any more understandable? This is what makes the tragic doctor so compelling. They push the moral envelope way beyond the conventional tragic hero. With the tragic doctor, we’re forced to answer deeper questions. How far can the tragic doctor go until they are beyond redemption? Do they deserve a smidgen more of redemption? Are they even allowed redemption?

Unfortunately, the tragic doctor will never give us the answers we want. The motivation and redemption of the tragic doctor remain just out of our grasp, as they should. This is because the tragic doctor, just like the tragic hero, does not exist to give us exact answers. The tragic doctor only serves as a clarifying lens, amplified by the chaos of medicine, showing us just how much more complicated life can get. The answers to the moral conundrum presented by the tragic doctor remains with the reader, revealing our own moral compass and, with that revelation, perhaps more empathy for others and ourselves.



**About the author**

**Wick Welker** writes novels in multiple genres, including medicine, science fiction, and post-apocalyptic. He is the founder of Demodocus Publishing, LLC. He is also a medical doctor, double boarded in critical care medicine and anesthesiology. He currently practices medicine and writes fiction in Minnesota with his wife and cat.





**Silvia Moreno-Garcia**  
Bestselling author of *Mexican Gothic*  
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## Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the bestselling author of *Mexican Gothic*, *Gods of Jade and Shadow*, *Certain Dark Things*, *Untamed Shore*, and more. She has also edited several anthologies, including the World Fantasy Award-winning *She Walks in Shadows* (a.k.a. *Cthulhu's Daughters*).

**Q. First of all, congratulations. *Mexican Gothic* seems to be on everyone's best-of lists this year (including winner of the 2020 Goodreads reader's choice for horror). How has the success of the book affected you?**

**Silvia:** Well, it's made some things easier, such as securing attention from certain outlets, and attracted readers who wouldn't have bumped into me before. But the basics remain the same. I work a full-time day job, I write at nights, and I tend to be a fairly productive and busy writer.

I think at the beginning of the year I was honestly just hoping this wouldn't be the end of my career because in the spring of 2020, COVID-19 created a whole chain of uncertainties. Publishers were pushing their dates left and right, bookstores were closing, shows and conventions were being cancelled. Every time I write a book I think to myself that if this is the last, I've had a good run. In this case, *Mexican Gothic* was my second and last book under contract with Del Rey and we didn't know if they would make an offer on a new novel. So I told myself that if this was the end of the line, at least I wrote a few things.

**Q. For those who haven't gotten around to reading *Mexican Gothic* yet, what are they in for?**

**Silvia:** *Mexican Gothic* has a classic Gothic set up: a young woman, in this case a socialite from Mexico City, travels to a remote location

where spooky things may or may not be afoot. The town where this takes place, although fictional, is inspired by a real place in Mexico: Real del Monte. And yes, it was mined by the British in the 19th century and it does have its very own English Cemetery, like in the book. The Guardian called it a cross between Lovecraft and the Brontes, and I really do like that description.

**Q. Besides writing—broadly—in the gothic/horror genre, you're also an award-winning fantasy writer, with books that sweep across genres. What does genre mean to you?**

**Silvia:** Every genre has a history and aesthetic and it's nice to explore both of those, but I don't feel beholden to one or the other. After all, if you look at something like *Frankenstein*, is that science fiction or horror or Gothic fiction? It's all three. People who worry about the carrots touching the peas, or one genre touching another, are bizarre.

**Q. You're a celebrated columnist for The Washington Post and book reviewer for NPR. How has the reading you do in those capacities affect your writing? And what are some of the great books you've recommended recently?**

**Silvia:** I tend to think of reading and editing as things that happen with a different part of my brain than the writing part. As for recom-

mendations, I thought there were many good horror books out in 2020, and I enjoyed *The Only Good Indians* and *Tender is the Flesh*. I was glad to see the reissue of Kojak's *The Cipher* in paperback. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* was a lovely book. I am a big fan of mushrooms.

I'm supposed to write an introduction for S. A. Cosby's *Blacktop Wasteland*, which was one of the highlights of the year on the crime side of things. As far as historicals, I thought *Conjure Women* was smart and engrossing. And my friend Lavie Tidhar came out with a cool Arthurian retelling, *By Force Alone*. I called it Tarantino meets the Knights of the Round Table. More people should read it!

**Q. What are you working on now?**

**Silvia:** Going through the copyedits of my next novel, *Velvet Was the Night*, which will be out in the summer of 2021. It's a noir set in 1971 against the background of student and government clashes. I will also have two reissues in 2021: my vampire novel *Certain Dark Things* and a romantic novel of manners called *The Beautiful Ones*. They both went out of print quickly and are coming back in paperback. And I have a sword and sorcery novella that will come out in the summer.





# THE DANGER OF THE UNINVITED

Classic noir and contemporary horror during the pandemic

BY AMBER COWIE

In the hands of the best writers, an unexpected knock on the door is far more sinister than a knife. And in this strange year, it's been unnerving to find that the scariest part of real life is that there are no knocks at all.

My door has remained closed to protect my family from the worst of the world—an invisible virus, treacherous authorities, and a burning climate. As a result, fictional knocks in classic noir and contemporary horror provided me with a strange and unexpected relief.

Reading books relying on the darkness of a different time, like *Strangers on a Train* and *Double Indemnity*, felt safer than reading the news. For months, I surrounded myself with former soldiers in grey flannel suits drinking five o'clock highballs to distract myself from social distancing and uncertain end points.

The most captivating book I read in this period is a touchstone of the genre: *In a Lonely Place* by Dorothy Hughes. With her characteristic talent for subtle tension, Hughes begins the story with the implication of a knock echoing around a dark California street. Her main character, Dix Steele, walks alone down a fog-filled street, pausing to watch a young woman getting off a bus. He thinks about following her to

her doorstep. He chooses not to do so when the house lights are on. Later, we learn that a woman was found murdered on that very street. Even later still, we realize that our narrator was the one to blame.

Escaping to post-war Los Angeles for the roughly two hundred pages of the novel was unsettlingly reassuring in a moment of global uncertainty. Steele is a man damaged by war and dislocated by peace. Like so many of us in 2020, he is constantly uneasy and unable to control his emotions. Unlike many of us, however, Steele's solution for his troubled mind is to seek the thrills of war by satisfying his misogynistic need to murder women.

Eventually, the ugly truth of Dix Steele is exposed by two riveting female characters in a deeply satisfying resolution. Unfortunately, there was no satisfying finale to be found for the physical, social, and environmental chaos which continued to encircle me in real life. If anything, the monsters were just getting started.

As the pandemic persisted, I sought the supernatural, not because I needed stories that eradicated fear, but because I was searching for a creature to contain it. Being scared of something invented was a lot easier than being

scared of something real. Stories about monsters usually end with a satisfying defeat of the terror. Those clear victories were a balm for me in a time with no conclusions. I filled my nights with monsters so I didn't have to deal with the monstrosities on my social media feeds. For that purpose, there was no better story than *The Babadook*.

*The Babadook* is, at its core, a story about grief. It was the perfect monster for a moment when we are all grieving the loss of easy intimacy and community connection. Some of us are grieving our health. The hardest hit among us must grieve loved ones like the film's main character, Amelia. After her husband dies in a terrible car accident while driving her to the hospital to give birth, she pushes down her sadness and anger to raise their son without him. But grief cannot be denied. Sooner or later, it comes knocking.

One night, Amelia finds an unexplained book on her son's bookshelf. The first pages warn that readers will hear "a rumbling sound then three sharp knocks" before a monster arrives. Later, the awful, predicted sounds wake her from her sleep. The Babadook appears and wreaks havoc in their home until Amelia faces her deepest saddest memories. The Babadook

is one of the scariest movies I've ever seen and also one of the most comforting. At the end of the movie, Amelia banishes the monster to the basement. She visits it occasionally then leaves it behind to live her life.

I first learned about the Australian horror film six years ago from my sister, who hates scary movies but found herself captivated by the extremely terrifying trailer. With wide eyes, she tapped play and we both jumped when we

heard the creature knocking on the door. The preview was so scary that I couldn't bear to watch the actual movie until 2020 when the real world became more frightening than the story.

The monstrous presence of the pandemic, climate change, and racialized violence arrived on our doorsteps uninvited. The monsters have taught me that must be faced, or they will become stronger. Knocks on the door get louder if they are ignored.

## About the author

**Amber Cowie** is a novelist and freelance writer living in a small town on the west coast of British Columbia. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Salon*, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Crime Reads* among other publications. She has appeared at Left Coast Crime, the Pacific Northwest Writers Festival, and the Whistler Writers Festival. She is a member of several writing groups and holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Victoria. She is a mother of two and reader of many. She likes skiing, running and making up stories that make her internet search history unnerving.

See more at [Ambercowie.com](http://Ambercowie.com)

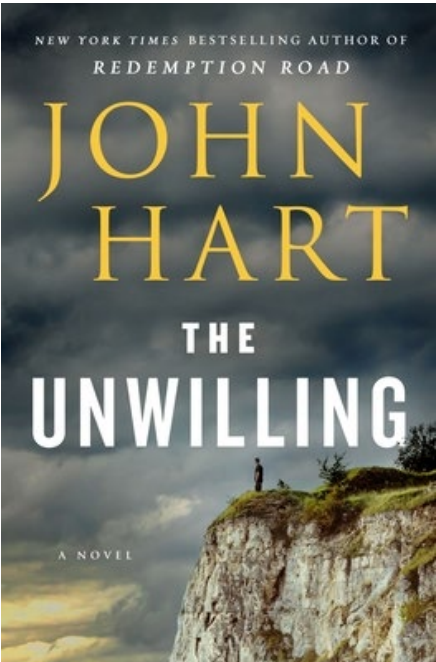




FEATURED REVIEW

THE UNWILLING

John Hart



By turns a family drama, coming-of-age story, and unnerving psychological thriller, *The Unwilling* by John Hart is altogether a very enjoyable, twisty ride.

This novel is many things, but above all, this is a novel of connections. At the heart of those connections sits Gibby French—son of the distant Gabrielle and the well-meaning Bill, brother to twins Robert and Jason, best friend to Chance, he's the fulcrum that the story hinges on. His uncertainty as he stands ready to move into adulthood is endearing. His determination to, above all, do the right thing is what really had me rooting for him.

Having lost Robert to Vietnam, the fact that Jason came home changed almost beyond recognition isn't enough to sever their connection. And when Jason's past comes calling to drop a bomb onto their already-disrupted lives, no threat will be enough to keep Gibby from doing whatever it takes to find the truth.

Initially, *The Unwilling* felt like a family drama, centered around Gibby's coming of age and his navigation of some truly rocky relationships. But when Jason found himself a suspect in a truly horrific murder, the focus widened to include one of the most chilling villains I've encountered yet. Mr. X is the kind of presence you don't soon forget. Patri-

ck Bateman and Hannibal Lecter would envy his detachment, not to mention his funding. His introduction marked a turning point in the story, as he sets into motion a chain of events that lead right back to Jason and Gibby.

It could have felt tricky to reconcile the two parts of this book. That John Hart has knitted those seemingly very different stories together into a cohesive whole is astounding, but he has, and masterfully. Brotherhood underpins everything here—the literal brotherhood of Gibby and Jason; the more figurative but equally strong fraternity of the police their father works with; the bonds forged by soldiers in wartime; even the links between Mr. X and his most trusted men. What happens to those chains of connection when they're tested is at the heart of every part of the book, and it took that initial setup to lay the groundwork for the reader to see what was at play.

*The Unwilling* is the kind of novel I have come to expect from John Hart: an absolutely excellent thriller from an author at the top of his game.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook

FEATURE

Police Procedural Tropes  
10 CLICHÉS THAT  
SHOULD BE LOCKED UP

BY ANDY MASLEN

Working within crime fiction conventions is a great idea. It's how writers deliver a story their readers want to read or see. And in the police procedural, that means two things. Ready?

One, police. Two, procedure.

But things can quickly get out of hand when writers don't spend enough time pushing out from the safety zone of the genre. That's when we end up with tropes and clichés. Like these bad boys and girls. (I include them all out of love. And admit to having used a few myself.)



## 1 The alcoholic cop

Policing's a stressful job, no doubt about it. But not so stressful that every single cop hits the bottle the moment they get home from work.

I get it, we need our lead characters to have flaws. But the booze-soaked cop has been done to death, possibly from cirrhosis. I always liked the way the CSI writers gave character Warrick Brown a gambling addiction instead.

## 2 The classic car

Morse had his Jaguar Mark 2. Bergerac his Triumph Roadster 2000. Magnum P.I., his Ferrari 308 GTS. Gene Hunt in *Life on Mars* ordered his sidekick to "fire up the Quattro." Dave Starsky had his Ford Gran Torino with that paintjob. The original series of *The Bridge's* Saga Norén has a sludge-coloured Porsche 911. Rebus has his beat-up Saab 900.

I blame Steve McQueen as Frank Bullitt. If only he'd chosen a Buick instead of that Mustang GT Fastback . . .

## 3 Jazz

Harry Bosch loves a bit of 'Trane. Nothing wrong with that. But listening to jazz has become a shorthand for a character's "interesting" side. Yes, at work they're a hotshot homicide honcho, bringing in, or down, the bad guys with a smack in the mouth or a slug from a forty-five. But at home, they switch on their valve-driven hifi and put on some Mingus, Miles, or Marsalis.

Enough already with the jazz! How about some Hendrix, Sex Pistols, or Red Hot Chili Peppers?



## 4 Not-too-bad gunshot wounds

She draws. She shoots. The villain returns fire. She's hit! Grimacing, she clamps a hand to her bicep, then clambers to her feet and charges off in hot pursuit. Which is fine, because it's a "through and through."

Now, mercifully, I have never been shot. But I've done my research. Pistol rounds create wound cavities. Smash bones. Blood goes everywhere. They. Hurt. Like. Hell. Don't even get me started on rifle rounds.

## 5 Divorced cops

Yes, police marriages don't always survive. But people don't marry cops thinking that their spouse will be home in time for tea Monday to Friday, chilled and chatty and with nothing more pressing than wondering where they left their stapler.

Cop marriages can be as strong as anybody else's. It's one of the ways the really stressed-out ones cope.

## 6 NASA-like forensic labs . . .

*Bones*, I'm looking at you. An autopsy suite on a raised platform made of plexiglass and thin rods of brushed aluminium. Of course! Because that's exactly how you'd design a facility for dissecting putrefying, burnt, and otherwise revoltingly damaged dead bodies.

Oh, and by the way, labs take ages to get results. It's not something that they just run up while the lead cop goes off for a latte and a cruller.

## 7 . . . and state-of-the-art police stations

From my chats with current and former cops, I am fairly confident in asserting that CID offices are not filled with the latest iMacs. Nor equipped with whizzy, touchscreen devices for displaying exhibits in suspect interviews.

Expect beaten-up grey metal filing cabinets with sticking drawers. Scale-encrusted kettles. Wonky desks from which the binding strips of veneer are peeling.

## 8 Talking instead of shooting

In the UK, AFOs (authorised firearms officers) are trained to contain, and, if necessary, shoot with deadly accuracy, people who otherwise would inflict great harm. You get one warning. "Drop your weapon." If you don't, they shoot you dead. Seven times in the head if they think you're wearing a suicide vest, so you don't trigger it in your death throes. What the cops don't do is try to reason with you, or allow you time to develop your monologue.

## 9 The row with the superior

Our cop is a maverick. He, or more rarely, she, gets results by bending the rules, or even breaking the rules' arms in a door and then kicking them down a stairwell. But there's a problem. Their time-serving, stickler-for-the-rules, greasy pole-climbing bureaucrat of a boss.

"Don't bring me hunches, Chris. I can't take a hunch to the DA."

"Yeah, well, maybe you've been sitting behind a desk too long."

"Maybe you should take a look at the nameplate on my office door."

Why not make the boss a mentor? Or have our protagonist be happily married but consoling the boss over their own imploding marriage?

## 10 Whiteboards

If you were running a complex, multi-stranded project involving hundreds of people and dozens of different but interconnected lines of enquiry, what tool would you use to record everything? Asana? Trello? Excel? I bet it'd be on a PC, whatever you chose.

Or how about . . . a whiteboard? Or a big old corkboard with lots of bits of paper thumbtacked to it and joined up with red string? Yeah. *That'd* work.

(Incidentally, my take on the red string? It harks back to the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Ariadne gave the Greek hero a ball of red thread to guide him back out of the labyrinth.)







## “There’s something you’re not telling me”

Odd, though, isn’t it, that despite the fact everyone knows and recognises these devices for what they are, they keep cropping up in our favourite books, TV shows and movies, from *True Detective* to *Silent Witness* to *Law and Order*. It’s because they work.

Pushed a little out of their regular shape, they offer the writers and their readers or viewers everything they require for a truly engrossing story. Because let’s remember, that’s what people want. What they’re prepared to

pay their Netflix subscription for, or their Amazon Prime membership, or the total on the till at their local bookstore.

Yes, actual policework might be four-fifths paperwork and one-fifth talking. Anyone over the rank of sergeant is unlikely to be doing anything except for sitting behind a desk. And guns stay holstered 99 percent of the time. But where’s the fun in that?



### About the author

**Andy Maslen** is the creator of three crime series. His latest book, *Shallow Ground*, published by Thomas & Mercer, is the first in a new series of police procedurals starring Detective Ford. The series is set in his adopted home city of Salisbury, UK.

He’s worked as a delivery driver, a cook in an Italian restaurant and, for most of his career before turning to fiction full-time, a marketing copywriter. He lives in Salisbury with his wife, two sons and a whippet named Merlin.

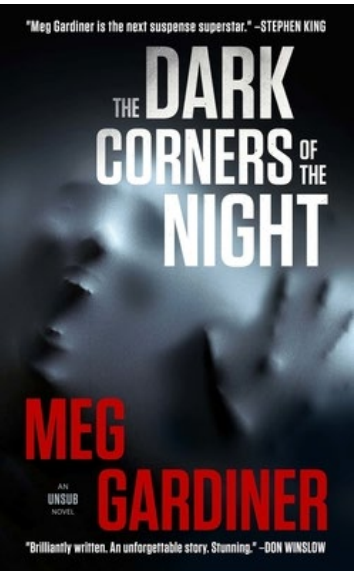
Join his readers’ group at [www.andymaslen.com](http://www.andymaslen.com)

Follow him on Twitter: @Andy\_Maslen

## AUTHOR Q&A



**Meg Gardiner**  
Edgar Award-winning author and president of Mystery Writers of America  
@MegGardiner1  
[meggardiner.com](http://meggardiner.com)



## Meg Gardiner

Meg Gardiner has won both Edgar and Barry awards. Her UNSUB series was bought by Amazon Studios for television. She’s the current president for Mystery Writers of America (MWA), a three-time Jeopardy! champion, and a Stanford Law graduate. Her books are universally bestsellers and have been translated into more than twenty languages.

**Q. Your latest book, *The Dark Corners of the Night* (third in the UNSUB series), was called “a great one” by Stephen King, among others to heap praise on it. Why do you think this one resonated so strongly?**

**Meg:** Thrillers create a sense of pulse-pounding excitement. Mine are like rollercoasters. They carry readers through ups, downs, high-octane twists and turns, and nail-biting tension. But action alone can’t make readers hold their breath or turn pages in excitement. Suspense and tension only arise when we care about the characters in the story. In thrillers, the characters are in mortal jeopardy—they have their backs against the wall and must overcome some deadly challenge to save themselves, their families, communities, or the world, often with time running out. Psychological thrillers add depth to the characters’ struggles. They generate an emotional gravity that draws readers in.

I think *The Dark Corners of the Night* connected with readers who care about the heroine, Caitlin Hendrix, and her FBI team as they dig deep to chase down a devious and elusive home invasion killer. Readers like the investigators, the investigation, and how everyone in the novel feels like a real person . . . from the FBI agents, to a twelve-year-old girl who helps save her family, to the dangerous and seemingly invisible killer, The Midnight Man.

**Q. Your writing has been called “Hitchcockian” for its twists. What do readers get out of a well-crafted twist?**

**Meg:** The best twists are surprising yet inevitable. They cause us to inhale and say, “Whoa—I didn’t see that coming.” And then, on further reflection, to think: “But now I see that the clues were always there.” Those kinds of twists arise from character and conflict. As

to writing twists . . . shh, don’t tell anyone, but writers get to revise, and to seed in clues for the setup, so that the payoff will be extra tasty.

**Q. You’ve written across many thriller subgenres: crime thrillers, psychological thrillers, procedurals, suspense, and more. Do you think there’s any value in looking at subgenres, or are your books all just, as the LA Times put it, “kickass” thrillers?**

**Meg:** I’ve always written the story that I want to read. I love relatable characters, especially women who have to rise to a challenge by finding new strengths. I love action and twists. So that’s what I put in my novels.

**Q. You’re currently the president of Mystery Writers of America, a role held by other greats (Sandra Brown, Lee Child, Harlan Coben, and Janet Evanovich to name a few). How does Mystery Writers of America help readers and writers of the genre?**

**Meg:** MWA is a professional organization whose motto is “Crime doesn’t pay—enough.” Its mission is to promote recognition and respect for crime writing and those who write it, to encourage literacy, and to support aspiring writers, booksellers, librarians, publishers, editors, agents, and the wonderful community devoted to the genre. We give crime writing’s highest honor, the Edgar Awards. We promote education and support writers throughout their careers. We also provide a great sense of camaraderie. If you want to meet others who love crime writing, check MWA out.

**Q. What are you working on now?**

**Meg:** UNSUB 4 is coming!



# Tumbleweed. Gunslingers. Suspense.

## Five films that are both Westerns and thrillers

BY JILL HAND & BRANDON BARROWS

**P**icture this: Two years after the close of the Civil War, a stagecoach rattles into a dusty frontier town somewhere in the Dakota Territory. A woman disembarks. She wears the unrelieved black of deep mourning, her face hidden beneath a black veil. In her valise is a Bible, a bottle of strychnine and a Colt Navy Revolver.

The woman's name is Celia Rye. She has business in this town. When her business is concluded, four men will be dead.

Thriller or Western? In this case it could be either. Or both. We think of thrillers as being set in foreign cities, East Berlin, perhaps, during the Cold War, or Nazi-occupied Paris. We think of them as occurring in the halls of power: the Kremlin, or the Houses of Parliament, or in Washington, D.C. Thrillers have even been set in the Arctic, and the Sahara Desert. But some of the best take place in the Old West.

Let's take a look at five films that do double duty as both Westerns and thrillers.

.....  
"Some of the best thrillers  
take place in the Old West."



### The Man Called Noon (1973)

A man wakes up in an alley with a head wound, an empty holster, and an angry mob out for his blood. To make matters worse, he has no idea who he is or why anyone would want to kill him. *The Man Called Noon* is not only a great Western, it's based on one of Louis L'Amour's few novels in which he seemed to be actively trying to merge the genre with noir. Some of the suspense-building and backstory elements that are woven seamlessly into the book are more in-your-face in the film, dragging the action down somewhat. It's still an exciting story, and one of the great Western thrillers.



### Shalako (1968)

The mysterious Shalako is a loner who lives in the desert, wanting little more than to be left in peace. When he runs across the trail of an Apache war party tracking a group of rich Europeans on a hunting trip, he takes it upon himself to warn them. Based on a novel by Louis L'Amour, *Shalako* combines the "man comes to town" trope with the "siege" plot that L'Amour was fond of. There's plenty of action, both of the gun-fighting and knife-fighting variety, as well as suspense, betrayal, and even love.



### High Noon (1952)

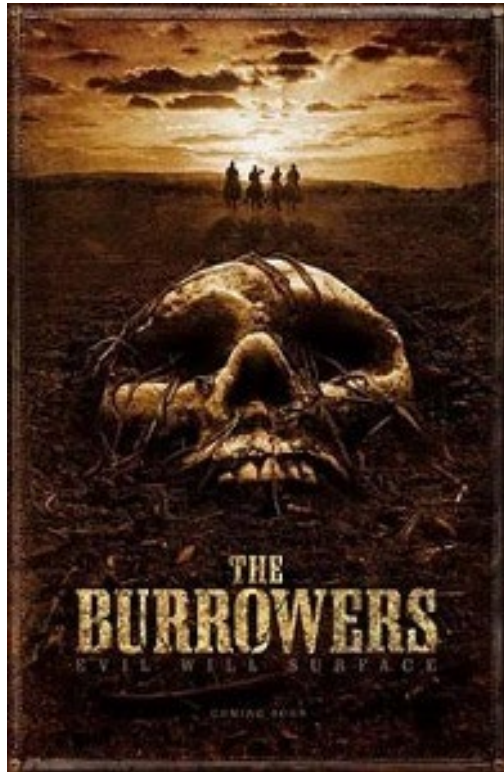
The action occurs in real time, with the hands on the clocks of a small New Mexico town advancing inexorably toward noon. That's when a train will pull into the station with a vicious outlaw on board. The outlaw was sent to jail by the town's marshal, Will Kane, played by Cooper. Kane and his new bride are about to leave town to begin a new life, but waiting at the station for the noon train to arrive are the outlaw's younger brother and the rest of his gang. It is evident they're not planning to throw a farewell party for the marshal. Not the kind with a cake and presents anyway. The party they're planning involves a coffin. Kane's wife, played by Grace Kelly, is out of her mind with fear and exasperation that he won't simply leave town before the bullets start flying. The suspense as the time ticks down to noon is tremendous. Nominated for seven Academy Awards, winner of four, as well as four Golden Globes, *High Noon* is a classic in the Western thriller genre.





## The Hateful Eight (2015)

Set in 1877, eight strangers seek refuge from a blizzard at a stagecoach lodge. There are bounty hunters, a prisoner about to be hanged and suspicious characters whose stories don't seem to add up. Alliances are formed and suspense builds. The coffee is poisoned and there's a blood-stained chair. With surprises at every turn, over-the-top violence, and razor-sharp dialogue, this is Tarantino at his best.



## The Burrowers (2008)

Subterranean monsters called Burrowers used to subsist by eating buffalo and the occasional Native American. White settlers are killing the buffalo and now Burrowers have abducted a pioneer family on the Dakota plains. A rescue party sets out to save them from what they think are natives, only to get a nasty surprise.

This film is excellent: low-budget horror combined with a Western-style thriller.

### About the authors



**Jill Hand** is a member of International Thriller Writers. Her Trapnell Thrillers, *White Oaks* and its sequel *Black Willows* follow the misadventures of a fabulously wealthy dysfunctional Georgia family.

[jillhandauthor.com](http://jillhandauthor.com)



**Brandon Barrows** is an active member of the Private Eye Writers of America and the International Thriller Writers. His latest crime novel, *Burn Me Out*, about lifelong mobster Al Vacarro's last twenty-four hours in la cosa nostra, was released Sept. 3, 2020.

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### REVIEW

## FEATURED REVIEW

# SAVAGE SON

Jack Carr



*“The platforms that hosted illicit activity on the Dark Web changed as international consortiums of law enforcement built cases on a virtual battlefield. Silk Road, AlphaBay, and Hansa were but a few of the cyber auction houses whose specialties catered to the dark side of man.”*

Many positive things have come from the advent of the internet, but there are very negative aspects. One is the ability of psychopaths and those with deviant desires to find one another. In the past, these people felt alone and knew they would have to control their darkest cravings. Now, they can easily find others with the same urgings, and they encourage and facilitate each other's most aberrant behavior.

Aleksandr Zharkov has risen through the ranks of the SVR, a Russian intelligence organization John le Carré (from the glossary in the back of the book) describes as the “KGB in drag.” Zharkov is the type of ruthless, immoral psychopath that governments find useful. He kills without remorse. In fact, he goes a step further: he kills with relish. On Medny Island, he can indulge his hunger to hunt men and women who have been unlucky enough to fall victim to his ire, or just ordinary people snatched from the streets of Africa. To Zharkov's mind, they are all expendable. Like any person who has to keep pushing their obsessions further to get the same thrill, he wants a hunting experience with the highest risk, and therefore the most satisfying reward. He wants to hunt the most dangerous apex predator on the planet: a US Navy SEAL.

He wants James Reece's head in a jar.

If you've read Jack Carr's first two books in this series, you will know that James Reece has lost about everyone he cares about while in the service of his country. He became the most wanted man in the world when he rooted out, at the highest levels of government, those who betrayed him on the battlefield in Afghanistan. If you are on the opposing side of James Reece, you are on the wrong side, and you are cursed to be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your short life.

Reece is finally getting some much-needed R&R in the wilds of Montana with his SEAL friend Raife Hastings while trying to work on his relationship with his girlfriend, reporter Katie Buranek. When Russian mafia thugs invade the Hastings Ranch to try to kill James

and Raife, the SEAL brothers know they won't be able to rest until the players behind the kill order are taken off the board.

Oliver Grey, a disgraced and traitorous ex-CIA bastard, wants Reece dead. He's tired of looking over his shoulder for the specter of his destruction. He works for Zharkov's mob father. He knows how the CIA thinks and believes he can use that knowledge to destroy Reece and Hastings. Little does Grey know that the psycho Zharkov has different plans for the SEAL blood brothers. Sometimes, when you acquire too many enemies, they start stepping on each other's dicks while trying to take a swing at you.

Reece doesn't want to know the odds. He knows the best-laid plans rarely survive first contact with the enemy. He is going to have to rely on his training and hope for some luck if he is going to have a chance against the forces arrayed against him.

Because of Carr's clearance level, some small sections of this novel have been redacted. This gives you a good idea of the authenticity of the background information he provides, and with a little bit of work, most readers can figure out some or most of what was sharpened by the government. Carr has a vast knowledge of weapons and gadgets that SEALs and bad guys find very useful, and he provides a helpful glossary in the back of the book to further explain the weapons and acronyms encountered in the text.

You will learn about alternative uses for ghost peppers, other than adding spice to your burritos. You will find yourself Googling the battle of Attu. You will be wondering about the feasibility of adding a Belgian Malinois to your home security. You will be practicing a move called disarming the snake. Most importantly, you will be wondering how you are going to get a hold of a copy of Jack Carr's next book . . . *The Devil's Hand*.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Keeten



