

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

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PRISON ESCAPE THRILLERS

Why the greatest
escapism starts with
a life behind bars

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**Feature: Love Triangles
and the Domestic Thriller**
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Author Q&A: Andy Weir
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**Feature: The 5 Loneliest Thrillers
(and Why They're So Good)**
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**Reviews: *The Hunting Wives*,
The Secret Stealers, and more**
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CONTENTS



16
POST-WAR THRILLS
These overlooked novels
from the mid-century
transport you to another era



14
ANDY WEIR
The bestselling author of
The Martian talks about his
upcoming *Project Hail Mary*

FEATURES

- 6 **Happily ever after?** Love triangles and the domestic thriller
- 10 **Isolation.** The five loneliest thrillers and why they're so good
- 16 **Overlooked.** Three domestic thrillers from the mid-century
- 19 **Prison escape!** Why the greatest escapism starts with life behind bars
- 24 **Spy thrillers.** The journey from book to movie

AUTHOR Q&As

- 9 Lisa Gardner on *Before She Disappeared*
- 14 Andy Weir on *Project Hail Mary*
- 23 Kealan Patrick Burke on *The House on Abigail Lane*

REVIEWS

- 28 *The Hunting Wives* by May Cobb
- 28 *The Secret Stealers* by Jane Healey
- 29 *Skystorm* by Steven Konkoly
- 31 *The Shadow Man* by Helen Fields
- 31 *The Cut* by Chris Brookmyre
- 32 *A Matter of Life and Death* by Phillip Margolin
- 33 *The Last Exit* by Michael Kaufman
- 34 *The Devil and the Dark Water* by Stuart Turton

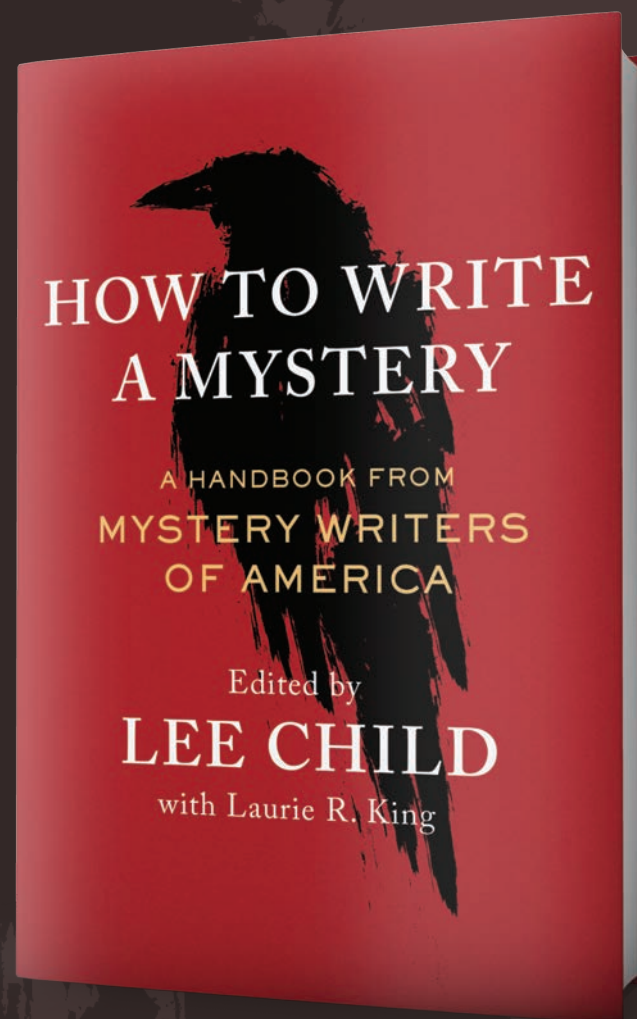
REGULARS

- 5 Editor's column

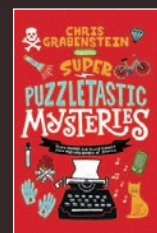
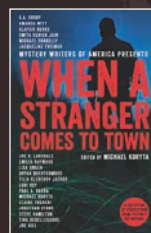


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We've finally gone and done it! What was last quarter just a digital magazine is now printed in glorious full color, ready to be thumbed through in an experience only a physical copy can offer. All the features, author interviews, and reviews as before (and really, more than ever), but now in a format that sits nicely on a coffee table, bookshelf, airplane seat pocket, or the back of the commode. Wherever!

There are a lot of big changes happening here at *Mystery and Suspense Magazine* and on our website at MysteryandSuspense.com. For the first time, our magazine is for sale. (The digital editions remain free.) Also, our team of writers is growing in leaps and bounds. We're interviewing bestselling authors, writing the in-depth articles you love to read in our covered genres, and reviewing some of the most notable and exciting upcoming books of 2021.

Stay tuned for more as we continue to grow. And thank you for your support and enthusiasm for mysteries, crime fiction, thrillers, horror, and suspense.

All the best,
Sam

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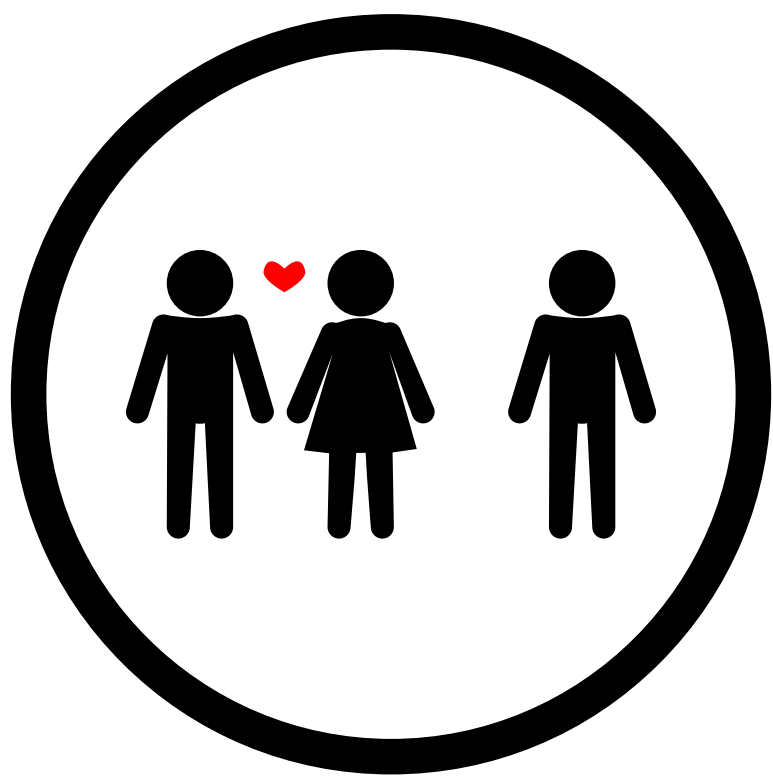
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LOVE TRIANGLES and the DOMESTIC THRILLER

BY SHELLY ELLIS

Happily ever after? Maybe in your average rom-com. But in a good domestic thriller, what starts off as a meet-cute quickly spirals into obsession, stalking, and even murder. **And that’s what we love about them.**



The age-old vices of lust and envy are popular motivators for real-life murder and mayhem. (A quick perusal of the episode descriptions on the Investigation Discovery channel shows that easily.) And nothing combines lust and envy better than a messy love triangle.

So it’s no wonder that this plotline pops up a lot in domestic thrillers: the wife who discovers her husband is secretly having an affair, the jealous boyfriend who suspects his girlfriend is falling for someone else, or the mistress who isn’t willing to play second fiddle anymore and wants to knock out the competition.

Though love triangles may vary from book to book and a skillful author can bring a new spin to this familiar conflict, there are a few common tropes that you can find in contemporary domestic thrillers with love triangles that keep readers turning the pages.

PSYCHOPATHS NEED LOVE, TOO

It’s not enough for us to watch love slowly drive a protagonist insane. For a domestic thriller with a love triangle, it helps if one of the main characters is unstable to begin with. This is why characters with antisocial personality disorders—in particular, sociopaths or psychopaths willing to maim and kill in the name of love—often take center stage. For example, Joe Goldberg in Caroline Kepnes’ novel *You* or Ayoola in Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, The Serial Killer*.

In *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, the Nigerian nurse Korede falls in love with the charming Dr. Tade Otumu, but the

doctor seems to only have eyes for Korede’s younger sister, Ayoola, whom he starts dating. But this isn’t just a simple love triangle or potential sibling rivalry gone amok. Ayoola has a pesky habit of murdering her boyfriends and leaving Korede to clean up the mess—literally. Korede now has more than jealousy as a motivator to keep Dr. Otumu and her sister apart; she knows that by falling for Ayoola, he’s put his life in danger.

In *You*, Joe becomes obsessed with the Natalie Portman look-alike Guinevere Beck when she strolls into his New York City bookstore one fine day. From there, a seeming meet-cute over a sales counter quickly spirals into a story about obsession and murder when Joe begins to stalk Beck online and in person and kills whoever gets in his way, including a romantic competitor. He justifies his behavior with the claim that he loves Beck and only wants to protect her from the “sickos” out there.

But according to psychologists, portraying psychopaths and sociopaths as intense, violent romantic figures in domestic thrillers is a work of fiction in itself.

Sociopaths can feel empathy and form some emotional attachments, but one of the traits of sociopathy is pathological egocentricity and incapacity for love, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Psychopaths, especially those with high psychopathy, are unable to form close intimate relationships, according to Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D., who wrote about what happens when a psychopath falls in love in *Psychology Today*. Those with high psychopathy tend to show a lack of

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For a domestic thriller with a love triangle, it helps if one of the main characters is unstable to begin with. This is why sociopaths or psychopaths often take center stage.



emotional attachment and empathy. This means their romantic relationships aren't based on traditional psychological intimacy (or what we know as "love") and are based more on a shared view of the world "in which both try to get as much out of people as possible," according to Dr. Krauss. And finally, being a sociopath or psychopath doesn't make you any more prone to violence than the average person, according to psychologists. So the knife-wielding, sociopathic mistress screaming "Love me!" while she boils your bunny on the kitchen stove may be riveting, but it is definitely taking artistic liberties. Still, it can make for a jaw-dropping story.

WHEN THE LOVE TRIANGLE ISN'T QUITE WHAT IT SEEMS

There is nothing quite like a thriller with a twist—and thrillers with love triangles are no exception. It would be way too simple for a story to be about a man, a woman, the lover that came between them, and the murder of one of those parties. There has to be an extra element that the reader didn't see coming.

In *My Lovely Wife* by Samantha Downing, Millicent and her husband are a seemingly simple couple who spice up their marriage with "date nights." But unlike traditional date nights that may involve a dinner and a movie, this couple spends their evening together murdering women that they both select. The couple that slays together, stays together—that is until Millicent's husband decides to break the agreed-upon rules and crosses a line with one of their potential victims. This decision will have ramifications for the couple's serial killing spree that he couldn't have predicted.

Another series of twists readers probably didn't see coming happen in Colleen Hoover's domestic thriller *Verity*. In the novel, Lowen Ashleigh is hired to write the unfinished books of

bestselling author Verity Campbell, who is now severely injured and unable to finish the books herself. While working on Verity's books, Lowen begins to fall in love with Jeremy, Verity's husband, who cares for her, too, but is still loyal to his ailing wife. But while collecting and reading Verity's notes, Lowen finds an unfinished manuscript by Verity that no one knew about. It may reveal a horrifying truth about Verity that will devastate Jeremy, but might also win him to Lowen's side.

And then there's *Behind Her Eyes* by Sarah Pinborough, a novel about single mother Louise who has a one-night stand with handsome David, whom she meets at a bar. She later finds out that not only is David her new boss, but he is also married. She meets his wife, Adele, and quickly befriends her while still being attracted to and pursued by David. The longer Louise stays around David and Adele, the more she realizes that there is something really "off" with the couple's marriage, and not just issues of infidelity. When the reader discovers what that something is, it is truly a jaw-dropping revelation.

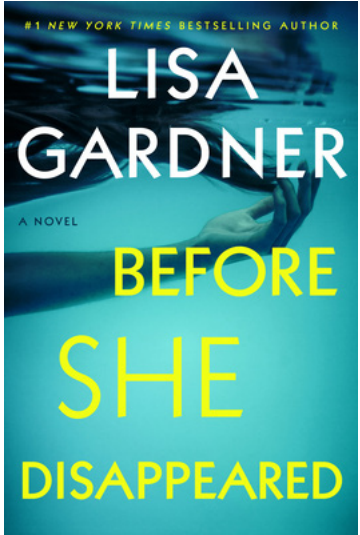
WHY LOVE TRIANGLES WORK SO WELL IN THRILLERS

Feelings of attachment and jealousy are perfectly normal human emotions. Psychologists even believe that not all romantic jealousy is bad. "Research has shown that jealousy can be a sign of feeling deeply in love with a partner," according to Noam Shpancer, Ph.D., in *Psychology Today*. "It may contribute to relationship satisfaction by signaling emotional commitment and investment. It may contribute to relationship stability by prompting partners to further nurture their bond and actively protect their union."

But in love triangles, jealousy and mistrust feed on themselves and can lead to a volatile reaction, which is the stuff good domestic thrillers are made of.



Lisa Gardner
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Lisa Gardner

Lisa Gardner is a #1 *New York Times* bestselling crime novelist. A self-described research junkie, she has parlayed her interest in police procedure and twisted minds into a streak of twenty-plus thrillers. Her latest, *Before She Disappeared*, is available now.

Q. *Before She Disappeared* is your first standalone in a while and is arguably the most anticipated thriller of 2021. What was your inspiration for Frankie Elkin? And what are readers in for in a story where one woman sets herself to searching when everyone else has given up?

Lisa: *Before She Disappeared* was inspired by the real-world efforts of Lissa Yellowbird-Chase, who grew frustrated by the number of women going missing on tribal lands and the lack of resources, or even interest, in finding them. The idea that one person, without any special training or background, can make such a difference, inspired me. And that brings recovering alcoholic Frankie Elkin to Mattapan where a fifteen-year-old Haitian girl went missing eleven months ago. How does anyone even disappear in a major urban environment with cameras, witnesses, and social media everywhere? Frankie is determined to find out.

Q. Your January 2020 release, *When You See Me*, is red meat for longtime fans, given the appearance of Detective D.D. Warren, Flora Dane, and Kimberly Quincy.

What can readers expect in the future for these three characters, apart or together?

Lisa: I'm not sure. I never plan ahead. I never meant for any of them to be repeating characters, let alone in a novel together. But clearly, I have a hard time being apart from my characters, so I'm sure something will happen sometime in the future. Does that help?

Q. For all the craziness of 2020, were you able to do any reading? Did any favorites stick out?

Lisa: I read so many great novels in 2020. Riley Sager's *Home Before Dark*. Lisa Unger's *Confessions On The 7:45*. Karin Slaughter's *The Silent Wife*. My favorite book of the year was *The Invisible Life of Addie Larue* by V.E. Schwab.

Q. What are you working on now?

Lisa: Frankie returns to take on a different sort of missing person case: one of the thousands of people who disappear each year on national public lands. She joins the search efforts, heads into the woods, and let's just say bad things happen from there.



About the author

Shelly Ellis is an NAACP Image Award-nominated author who has written more than a dozen novels in different genres. Her fiction writing career began when she became one of four finalists in a first-time writers contest when she was 19 years old. The prize was a publishing contract and having her first short-story romance appear in an anthology. Her latest novel, *The Three Mrs. Greys*, is a twisty domestic thriller that comes out in March 2021.

Learn more at shellyellisbooks.com.

ISOLATION IN THRILLERS

The five loneliest thrillers and why they're so good

BY SHELLEY NOLDEN

Instinct tells us not to go into the creepy, dark woods or the spooky, abandoned house alone. Humans are a cooperative species; we embrace the concept of safety in numbers. And when our support networks and protective backups are ripped from us and we face threats, or even the perception of danger, on our own, we panic and worry; we fear.

For most, the natural response to crises is to be together, to unite, to lean on one another and share the grief, while trying to make sense out of the devastating, inexplicable event. After the horrific attacks of Sept. 11, in shock and horror, I gathered with my fellow University of Minnesota students. During this terrifying global pandemic, we yearn to find strength and comfort in each other, our extended families and friends. Our loved ones.

Instead, to halt the spread and suffering, we've been instructed to fight our natural instinct and desires; to remain apart, to stay home with only our immediate families or roommates; to visit either through the screens of phones and computers, or to gaze at our older generations with panes of glass separating us. Through the loss of what we'd always taken for granted, we've learned how much we need other people, and how heart-breaking and scary it is when we can't have them with us. When we can't be with or there for them.

The fear of being alone is a base and primal concern that has compounded the emotional toil of the past year for so many. But this same inherent fear of isolation and helplessness can translate into a riveting, all-consuming reading experience with

thrillers that explore and mine from these themes to heighten the stakes. Watching others become ensnared in seemingly impossible situations can leave us captivated and on the edges of our seats, involved and invested, worried over and rooting for protagonists to escape the horrors entrapping them and emerge safely, hope still somehow intact.

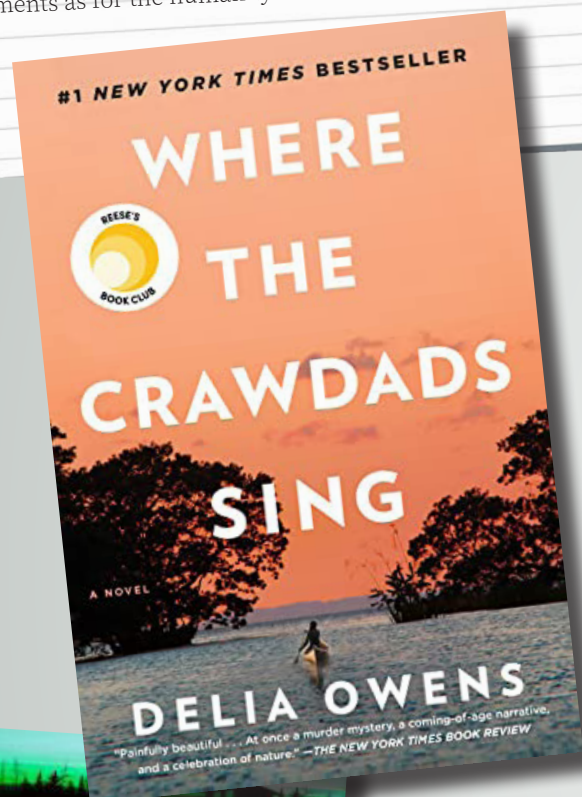
One's inability to attain help when staring down imminent danger elevates tension, palpably and viscerally. We put ourselves in the shoes of characters who might be forced to solve excruciatingly pressing problems alone, without the benefit of backup and support, as the clock ticks away the little time they have left.

By playing on our human emotions and needs, our reflexes and expectations, our nightmarish worst-case scenarios, and our burning longing for the good guys to be liberated and the evil-doers to receive the justice they've got coming, thriller writers have had their fingers on our collective pulse. Their books have achieved astronomical success, with many of them *New York Times* and international bestsellers, and optioned and produced for film and television.

The themes of abandonment, seclusion, and psychological cruelty permeate these five standout thrillers, each of whose author boasts their own fabulous vision, voice, and impeccable style. These elements capture and stir me as they do millions of other devoted thriller readers across the globe. During this time of our own forced isolation, the imminent danger present in these gripping novels can provide a welcome escape.

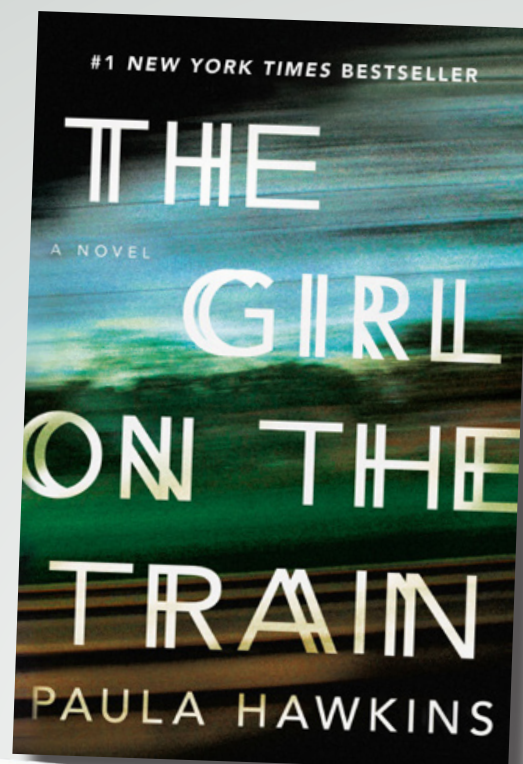
Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens

With some 8.4 million copies sold (and counting), *Where the Crawdads Sing* features Kya, who, it could be argued, has become the most beloved recluse in literature. This profoundly sympathetic and resilient protagonist, who has endured so much, tugs on our heartstrings and feeds our desire to route for the underdog. Spending well over a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list, this haunting tale captivates every bit as much for its crime drama elements as for the humanity at its core.



The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins

This #1 *New York Times* bestseller and hit film is a play on the unreliable narrator. Loneliness pervades with Rachel. Her alcoholic blackouts are manipulated by her ex-husband, who gaslights and nearly destroys her. Hawkins spins suspenseful magic, as the tension swells until it nearly bursts.



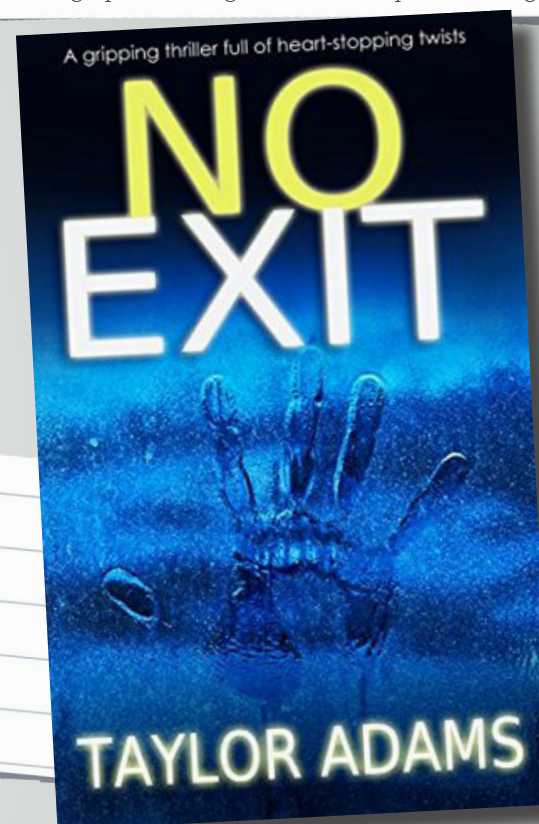
The Wife Between Us by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen

This brisk bestseller explores the theme of male dominance and wholesale control, which manifests in enforced and manipulated isolation. *The Wife Between Us* serves up likable characters in Nellie and Vanessa while delivering addictive suspense that builds into an explosive twist that stuns and satisfies. This impressive first collaboration set the stage for Hendricks and Pekkanen's follow-up thriller, *An Anonymous Girl*, which debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list.



No Exit by Taylor Adams

A classic depiction of the horrors of isolation, in *No Exit*, a college student is stranded in an unrelenting blizzard while en route to see her dying mother. Without a cellphone signal at a snowed-in rest stop alongside a handful of strangers, things quickly turn dicey. Adams's superb skills are in full display as he choreographs thrilling twists with exquisite timing.



The Marsh King's Daughter by Karen Dionne

Now published in twenty-five languages, *The Marsh King's Daughter* is an international bestselling psychological thriller. Helena has been cruelly tested by her father, the man who abducted Helena's mother, while living in the remote marshlands of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Dionne's masterful hand brings into terrifying color the ravages of extreme and punishing isolation as she digs into the intense weight of keeping secrets and reinvention.

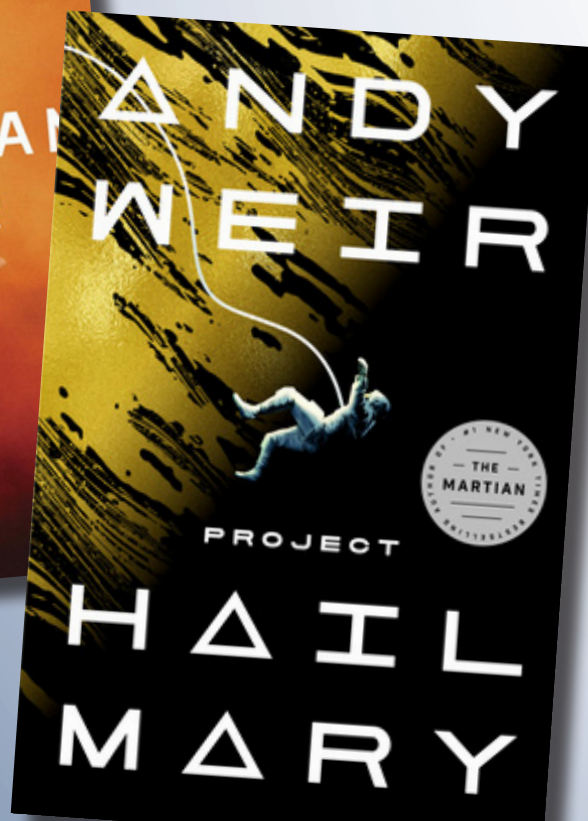


About the author

Shelley Nolden is a graduate of the University of Minnesota, an entrepreneur, and a writer, now residing in Wisconsin. Previously, she lived in the New York City area, where she first learned of North Brother Island. At the age of 31, Shelley was diagnosed with leukemia and completed treatment three years later. The sense of isolation and fear she experienced during her cancer ordeal influenced her debut novel, *The Vines*, which you can learn more about at shelleynolden.com.



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Andy Weir

Andy Weir is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Martian*, as well as *Artemis* and the upcoming *Project Hail Mary*. A former software engineer and self-proclaimed space nerd, he's a science-fiction and sci-fi thriller writer with few peers, living or dead.

Q. *Project Hail Mary* is coming in May 2021—a science-based thriller about an astronaut who has to save the earth from disaster. Which of your past books is this most like? What can you tell us about the protagonist, Ryland Grace?

Andy: It's more like *The Martian* than *Artemis*. Ryland Grace is a scientist all by himself out in space. I can't tell you too much about him without giving away major plot points. But I can tell you he's a distinctly different person than Mark Watney or Jazz Bashara.

Q. Your short story, *Randomize*, reminded me in a small way of the kind of sci-fi heist that could be in an episode of *Rick & Morty*. What TV and movies are you watching right now?

Andy: I'm watching everything you would expect a nerd to watch: *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek Discovery*, *The Mandalorian*, any comic book movie that comes out (I just watched *Wonder Woman 1984*). They don't really inspire my writing much because it's not the kind of sci-fi I write. They're more space opera or fantastical stuff and I stick to hard science. But I still enjoy watching them.

Q. Famously, you're a big board game fan. Any you're enjoying right now?

Andy: With the pandemic, I'm limited to games I can play with friends online. Fortunately, there are a lot of virtual gaming services out there. So we're playing a lot of *Ticket to Ride*, *Power Grid*, *Just One*, *Codenames*, *Bohnanza*, and *Hanabi*.

Q. *The Martian* came out more than eight years ago but continues to be one of the most popular sci-fi thrillers of all time. When you first self-published the story on your personal website, did you imagine it could have this kind of mainstream appeal?

Andy: No, I had no idea it would have mainstream popularity. I thought I was writing a story for a tiny niche of hardcore science nerds.

Q. What are you working on now?

Andy: My next book! I don't want to talk about it yet because I never know if I'm going to ditch the project until I'm well into it.



Overlooked Domestic Thrillers

Three overlooked domestic thrillers from the mid-twentieth century

BY JOSEPHINE DAMIAN

In romance novels, love interests start off at odds with one another. Soon, they're challenged to overcome their conflict. The ending is upbeat. And they live happily ever after.

The domestic thriller is the flip side of the romance novel. These stories start with the happy relationship—either between romantic partners or parents and children—and then descend into turmoil.

Published in 2012, Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* put domestic thrillers at the top of everyone's reading list, its popularity spurring on similarly named books like *The Girl on the Train* and *The Girl in the Window*. On a parallel path are novels like *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty. The success of these books has led to lucrative film and TV deals for their authors.

As a subgenre, the domestic thriller centers on a seemingly content suburban woman, usually married. She is leading what appears to be a mundane existence until murder upends her equilibrium. This exposes her underlying unease and forces her to reexamine her needs, her home life, and who she is at her very core.

Like any good thriller, things are not as they appear to be.

Long before the aforementioned bestselling authors were born and prior to the feminist movement of the 1970s, there were women authors on both sides of the Atlantic whose domestic thrillers featured complex, independent-minded women caught up in murder. The years following the end of WWII brought forth a wealth of domestic thrillers penned by women, many of them overlooked by today's reader.

Back then, with their husbands off fighting in the war, wives were forced to manage on their own. For the women novelists of the era, some wondered what if the thing a housewife had to manage was murder?

THE BLANK WALL

When Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, a writer known for her romance and detective fiction, turned her hand to writing a domestic thriller, the result was a book that prompted Raymond Chandler to dub Mrs. Holding "the top suspense writer of them all," stating that she "excelled at the exploration of domestic unease."



The Blank Wall, published in 1947, is about an aging suburban matron, Lucia Holley. Already overwhelmed by domestic problems, she is implicated in the murder of her teenage daughter's entirely inappropriate boyfriend, a much older man. The situation, made worse by blackmail, forces her out of society's ideal of the sheltered mid-twentieth-century housewife and into the role of a skilled criminal, all to hold her family together. Lucia rises to the occasion, revealing a darker and more capable side of herself in order to protect her daughter and return to the calm of the status quo.

A quote from the book sums up the essence of the domestic thriller: "This is my life, going on just the same. ... And all that had happened to her would be, must be pushed down, out of sight; the details of daily living would come like falling leaves to cover it."

THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN

After having been heavily bombed during WWII, England suffered a housing shortage. This sets the stage for Celia Fremlin's *The Hours Before Dawn*. The story revolves around Louise, a sleep-deprived mother of an infant who keeps her up all night with its crying. Her insensitive husband insists she keep the child quiet, but offers no help or advice on how to do this. With Louise unable to work, the couple takes in a boarder to make money, the spinster Miss Brandon, a seemingly benign

schoolteacher who says she doesn't mind the crying baby.

Frustrated and exhausted, it's not long before a series of strange events makes Louise wonder if their boarder is really who she claims to be. But Louise can't get anyone to believe her. The insights into the lives and inner thoughts of the women from this era elevate books like *The Hours Before Dawn* above their fundamental crime-based plots.

"[T]he one who doesn't mind a half-mile walk is always in a stronger moral position than the one who does; and so Louise stepped meekly onto the trolley-bus behind her husband, wishing that her only pair of high-heeled sandals were smart enough to justify the discomfort they were causing. There is no proverb to comfort the woman who suffers and yet fails to be beautiful."

MY COUSIN RACHEL

Daphne du Maurier's best-known novel *Rebecca* was published in 1938, but it is the lesser-known *My Cousin Rachel* that some consider superior. While actually set in the nineteenth century, it was released in 1951 and should be counted among the best of domestic thrillers published in the mid-twentieth century. Entirely told from the point of view of the naïve, young male protagonist, Philip Ashley, we never get a glimpse of Rachel's inner thoughts or true intentions: is she a black widow who murders for money and social gain, or is



she the charming relation from Italy who has almost everyone eating out of the palm of her hand?

It leaves the reader to decide for him or herself if Rachel is capable of murder. There is a passage in the book as Philip ponders all that has passed between him and his beloved that perfectly sums up the essence of domestic thrillers, past and present: “I wondered how it could be that two people who had loved could yet have such misconception of each other. ... There must be something in the nature of love between a man and woman that drove them to torment and suspicion.”

While Rachel has everyone around her snowed, it is only the daughter of Philip’s guardian, a plain mouse of a girl, who sees Rachel for the schemer and manipulator that she is. She tells Philip as much, only to be dismissed. Later she tells him, “... you think me merciless and hard. Sometimes a woman sees more

clearly than a man. Forgive me for hurting you. I only want you to be yourself again.”

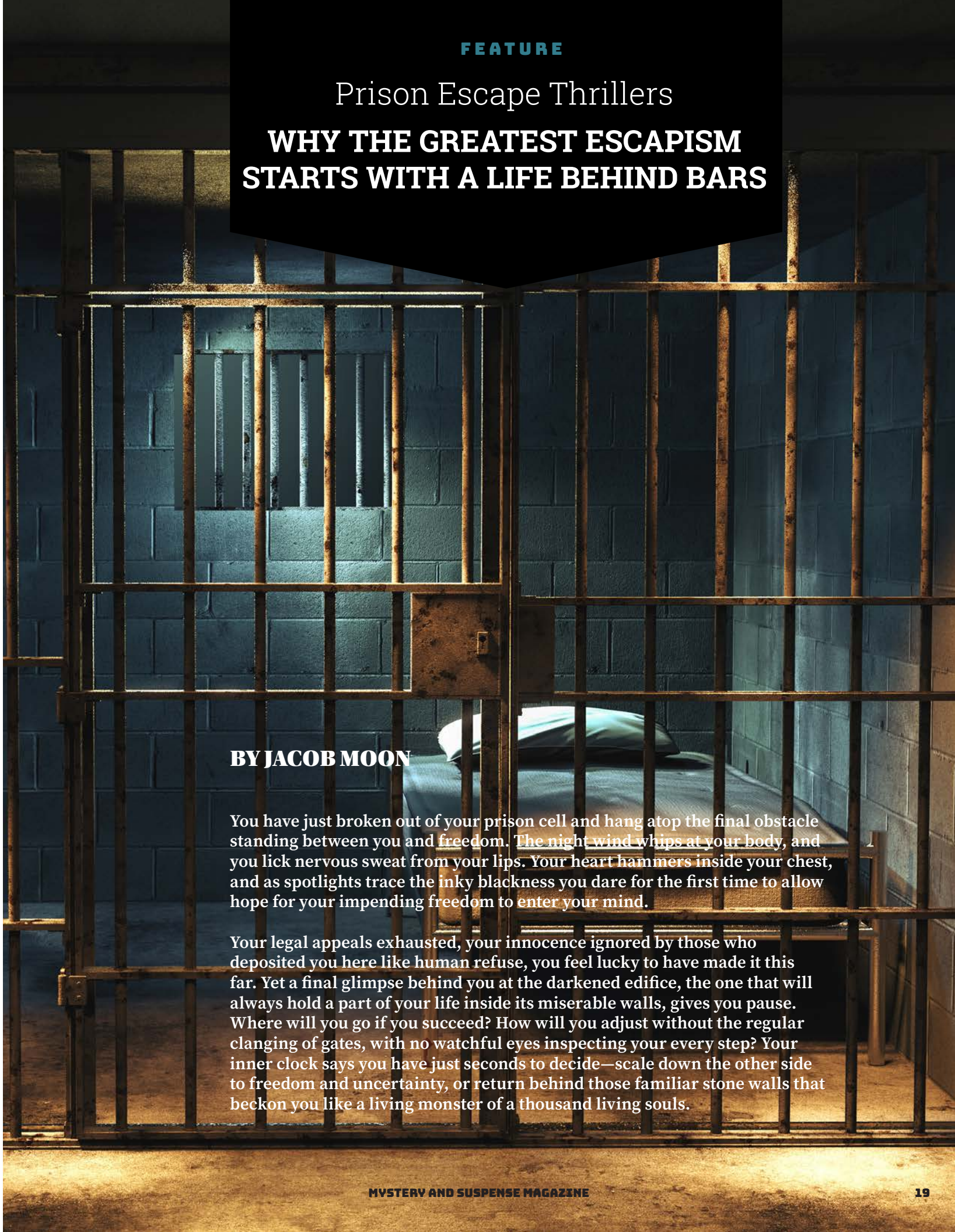
Domestic thrillers will always be popular because their plots are rooted in the mundane conflicts that occur in marriages and families. In the struggle to maintain the equilibrium of everyday life after the upheaval of a heinous act, the reader is left wondering whether things can really go back to normal once a woman’s darker, more nuanced side reveals itself. The central theme of these novels is a woman who, after being ignored and dismissed, asserts the fact that she is strong, capable, and keenly observant, far moreso than the man of the house, which makes her better equipped to recognize evil intent and dispatch it summarily from her household.



About the author

A funny thing happened on her way to writing a serial killer novel. **Josephine Damian** discovered she had an aptitude for murder-investigations, earned her master’s in behavioral analysis, and interned at the Medical Examiner’s Office. As the assistant to their forensic anthropologist, she saw dead people. Years passed. Then the muse’s siren call beckoned her back to writing. Her *Child Abduction Response Team* series is a fictionalized account of the hard-earned courage it takes to become an investigator who specializes in missing child cases.

See more at JosephineDamian.com



FEATURE

Prison Escape Thrillers

WHY THE GREATEST ESCAPISM STARTS WITH A LIFE BEHIND BARS

BY JACOB MOON

You have just broken out of your prison cell and hang atop the final obstacle standing between you and freedom. The night wind whips at your body, and you lick nervous sweat from your lips. Your heart hammers inside your chest, and as spotlights trace the inky blackness you dare for the first time to allow hope for your impending freedom to enter your mind.

Your legal appeals exhausted, your innocence ignored by those who deposited you here like human refuse, you feel lucky to have made it this far. Yet a final glimpse behind you at the darkened edifice, the one that will always hold a part of your life inside its miserable walls, gives you pause. Where will you go if you succeed? How will you adjust without the regular clanging of gates, with no watchful eyes inspecting your every step? Your inner clock says you have just seconds to decide—scale down the other side to freedom and uncertainty, or return behind those familiar stone walls that beckon you like a living monster of a thousand living souls.



WHAT DRAWS US TO PRISON ESCAPE THRILLERS?

Ever since cavemen etched visages of themselves absconding from enemy encampments and disciples recorded the Israelites’ flight across the parted Red Sea, human beings have been fascinated with reading of others’ escapes from bondage. Indeed, the concept of incarceration itself tends to incite fear and terror in us as few other things do, death itself included.

Throughout the centuries, as the institution of incarcerating criminals spread, we have seen the fascination for humans escaping their bonds turn into near obsession. Clearly, readers have an appetite for this ultimate adventure. But a closer look at the popularity of the crime subgenre known as “prison breaks” poses the larger question of why readers are so engrossed with the concept in the first place.

Perhaps the best answer can be found within the human psyche itself. We are an independent and explorative species. The Puritans escaped religious persecution (and at times physical bondage) when they sailed for the New World. As they enslaved a race of people themselves, they would become living hypocrites to the very idea that human beings should never persecute each other. Today, regardless of our race, we no doubt feel the same innate yearning for freedom that our ancestors did.

But in today’s terms, just how does that yearning translate? On a smaller scale, yet bearing no less importance to our modern sensibilities, many of

us have wished to escape the trap of a dull job, a listless relationship, even an endless traffic jam. Now extrapolate those emotions to an infinitely larger scale by hearing a judge’s gavel punctuate your life sentence, punishment for a crime you may or may not have committed. Vicariously, readers of such tales can experience what those unfortunate souls must then endure—thrown into dungeons or dank cells where the days pass interminably, having to subsist on meager food and horrors that await after the lights go out. Death for us all is guaranteed. But to subsist forever entrapped by walls and fences is not. It could very well be the ultimate fear for most of us. That we can read of others’ such plights, experiencing a character’s full range of emotions and finally cheer their looming escape from this living hell, may help to explain the allure of prison escapes in fiction.

TWO PINNACLE PRISON ESCAPE THRILLERS

Of the many examples of these stories, several come immediately to mind. As different as their subjects and respective authors’ methods of delivery are, each tale succeeds in captivating the imaginations and ethos of millions of readers, both past and present.

The Count of Monte Cristo

In 1844, Alexander Dumas published *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a tale of a wrongfully imprisoned man who escapes to enact a protracted revenge on those responsible for his conviction. Readers see our likeable hero Edmond

waste away in the inhospitable island fortress of Château d’If. With seemingly no hope of ever returning to his fiancée and life in general, he executes a daring escape, which the reader discovers with little warning. That the escape occurs at all is never in doubt (we are privy to it from the book’s own description). What is in doubt is the escape’s timing and method.

In what is likely the novel’s most exciting scene, readers share Edmond’s emotions—fear, desperation, hope—as he seizes what will likely be his only real chance to free himself. What happens to him once he succeeds is almost secondary. Although the escape sequence occurs early in the story, readers have already experienced one of the largest emotional payoffs they will likely receive. Indeed, Dumas’ tale cannot, and should not, be reduced to simply a prison break. But a glimpse into the aspect of the human psyche that is the yearning for freedom, and the scales of true justice being equaled, may explain why we cheer loudest for Edmond to escape his doom.

Different Seasons

Nearly a century and a half later came another famous fictional escape story, Stephen King’s “Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption.” Included in King’s novella collection *Different Seasons*, it was later immortalized by the extremely popular film adaptation directed by Frank Darabont. Unlike Edmond in Dumas’ tale, Andy Dufresne in the book version of *Shawshank Redemption* is guilty of his crime. The question then arises as to why readers still cheer for his escape. Continuing our glimpse into the human psyche, readers find empathy for Andy, because the crimes inflicted upon him by the brutal prison gang known as “the Sisters,” as well as the corrupt warden, seem to override his own crimes that landed him there in the first place. Even if they do not, we can sense a perversion of justice taking place. But a simpler reason could be that Andy exemplifies one of the hallmarks of humanity—he refuses to give up hope.

He overcomes his own emasculation; he succeeds in building the prison library after being thwarted for years; he risks solitary entombment for a chance to give his fellow convicts a glimmer of happiness. He typifies what each of us wishes we

could do in a similar situation, all while enduring an unimaginable fate. Unlike Dumas, King chooses to conceal the plans for Andy’s escape by using another character to narrate the story. By virtue of this point of view, readers are stunned to learn of the escape right along with Red, the warden, and the other guards. Having endured Andy’s humiliations right along with him, we almost forget why he was imprisoned in the first place. Like watching a long-caged bird suddenly fly free, we are left at story’s end with a sense that all is now how it should be. As cathartic an experience as any in fiction, the ending to *Shawshank Redemption* is a classic example of a climax that is both inevitable and surprising.

PRISON ESCAPE THRILLERS AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

And isn’t this what we as humans are really searching for? A righteous ending of our own stories, to challenge the paradigms that have shaped our existences? When reading of others’ imprisonment, we can experiment with embracing the darkest of our emotions. If a character gains life beyond the page and enters our minds as an embodiment of ourselves, we can also experience the opposite effect—the joy and exhilaration of sudden freedom. Our boring jobs, listless relationships, even the impending traffic jam, suddenly do not seem as hopeless, at least for as long as we keep turning the pages.

Countless other literary examples no doubt aid readers’ collective fascination with prison escapes, as well as escapes of body and mind in general. From Alex Haley’s *Roots*, showcasing the inhumanity of slavery, to Anne Frank’s diary depiction of self-incarceration in an attic, readers through the decades have examined the lives of those unfortunate souls of all races and genders who, like the proverbial bird in a cage, have looked beyond their bars and yearned to spread their wings to the sky.

So as the wind whips you in the face and you look back to those darkened walls behind you, consider your next move. Which side of the fence you scale down will decide how the rest of your life will go: backward to certain security and structure, or forward to a life lived at your own hand, free to chase dreams that flutter like wings of a newly freed bird. Which will it be?



About the author

Jacob Moon is a former U.S. army veteran and current supervisor at a large county jail in Clearwater, Florida. His career has greatly assisted him with this article, as well as with his 2020 crime fiction novel *Furlough*, the story of a wrongfully imprisoned man who escapes in search of the child he has never met. Jacob has published short stories in international and national magazines and plans on a story anthology in the near future. Among other things, he enjoys sports, great food, and travel. Combining all three is a huge bonus. Learn more at writerjake.com.



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AUTHOR Q&A



Kealan Patrick Burke
Bram Stoker Award winner
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Kealan Patrick Burke

Hailed by Booklist as “one of the most clever and original talents in contemporary horror,” Kealan Patrick Burke was born and raised in Ireland and emigrated to the United States a few weeks before 9/11. Since then, he has written five novels, among them the popular southern gothic slasher *Kin* and more than two hundred short stories and novellas, including *The House on Abigail Lane*, which is currently in development as a TV series.

Q. Your latest, *The House On Abigail Lane* (June 2020), came out to strong reviews. What does this haunted house story offer for readers of the genre?

Kealan: Ever since Anne Rivers Siddons’ *The House Next Door*, I’ve been fascinated by the idea of a *newly built* house being haunted, especially since the genre is rife with old gothic mansions steeped in dark history. It begs the question of how a house without such history could possibly contain dangerous energy. In Siddons’ book, the solution could be traced back to the architect, so I didn’t want to go that route. Instead, I decided I would upend the format entirely and present it as a sort of narrative found-footage faux documentary, using only the evidence made available to the narrator via personal accounts, police reports, and published texts, so that the narrator is attempting to figure out the impossible at the same time as the reader. I think more than anything this approach, as well as the diverse and unusual nature of the things that happen in Number 56, present a fairly atypical approach to this particular genre trope, one which appears to have resonated with readers.

Q. Though you’ve lived in the U.S. for nearly twenty years, you were raised in Ireland. How has your sense of place affected your writing?

Kealan: A change as big as a move from Ireland to here was bound to have a dramatic impact in so many ways. I’ve also traveled this country extensively, most notably via amazing east and west coast road trips, so I think I have a better sense of where I live, which in turn informs my writing. I prefer to write about places I’ve been, rather than relying solely on my imagination, so in that regard, I feel that travel has broadened my palate, added color and character to an otherwise single-shaded sensibility.

Q. Impressively, you’ve been nominated for five Bram Stoker Awards. What does it mean to you to be part of the celebrated company of those recognized authors?

Kealan: Nominations for anything are always a thrill, but not something to obsess over, or you’ll drive yourself mad. That said, when I won the Bram Stoker Award for *The Turtle Boy* in 2005, it felt like winning the lottery and I certainly celebrated accordingly (as did my family back home). While it doesn’t open the doors to some magical

kingdom that irrevocably alters your professional destiny, it certainly feels wonderful to be acknowledged by your peers, so I’m forever grateful for that, and I’m always proud to use the accolade for marketing purposes. Plus, the statue is very, very cool, and has a place of pride on my shelf.

Q. Your writing career goes beyond novels, into film and graphic novels. What have you produced in those mediums? And how does working in those formats contribute to your storytelling?

Kealan: In terms of film, all that’s been produced thus far are shorts, one of which I wrote (“The Cold”), the other, an adaptation of one of my short stories (“Peekers”). I’m immensely proud of both of them. There’s other stuff in the works, most notably two TV shows and a film, but as with all things Hollywood, I can’t say very much right now and probably wouldn’t even if I could lest I jinx it, because as anyone who’s been around the block knows, just because you get a green light doesn’t mean the car’s going to start.

In the graphic novel department, I have adapted three short stories of mine for director John Carpenter and producer Sandy King’s *Tales for a Halloween Night* series of horror anthologies and will be working with them again soon on a full-length project I wrote for their comics line. I can’t wait for that one to be announced. The art is spectacular.

It’s very gratifying to write in different mediums. It forces you to push yourself, to adapt, to learn new ways of doing things, to be more collaborative. Writing books is a solitary affair, so working with artists and producers is an exciting and rewarding change, because you get to see how others envision and interpret your work in real time. And as a novelist, I find scriptwriting a great way to rein in my worst tendencies. It teaches you the value of brevity and economy, a considerable boon for any writer.

Q. What are you working on now?

Kealan: I recently completed my sixth novel, *Mr. Stitch*, and that’s with my agent now. I’m currently working on some short stories I owe to various editors, and a comic book script that’s long overdue. After that, I return to some novellas that have been simmering, among them *Ward*, the prequel to one of my more popular books, *Sour Candy*.





Spy Thrillers: The Journey from Book to Movie

BY HEIDI SLOWLINSKI

Film adaptations can be challenging. To start with, screenwriters need to condense hundreds of pages of source material to fit a mere two-hour time limit. All the while, they must maintain the integrity of the original story. With pulse-pounding action, jaw-dropping plot twists, and even romance, spy novels make some of the best book-to-film adaptations. Here are eight adaptations that offer something for everyone, from action to nonfiction to comedy.



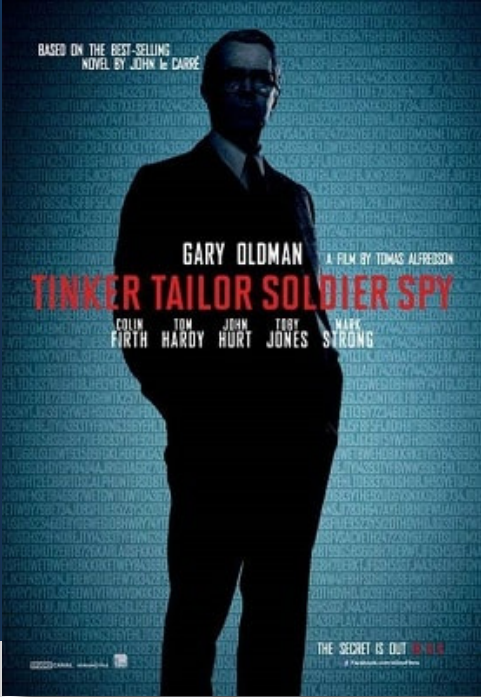
The Hunt for Red October

This bestseller is credited with launching Tom Clancy's career. Book three in the Jack Ryan series was originally published in 1984 and still holds readers enthralled. This spy thriller is set within a military trope. Jack Ryan is a CIA analyst who finds himself at the center of a high-stakes game of hide-and-seek between two super powers when a Soviet submarine commander makes a decision to turn his boat west while out in the Atlantic. This story was originally adapted into film in 1990. Its star-studded cast featured the late Sir Sean Connery, Alec Baldwin, Scott Glenn, James Earl Jones, and Sam Neill. The film was the 6th top-grossing movie released in the U.S. that year and continues to receive outstanding reviews. Not bad considering the film had to condense 432 pages of text into a 2-hour-and-15-minute film.



Charlotte Gray

Sebatian Faulk's third installment in the French Trilogy received somewhat mixed reviews when compared to the first two books. The story follows Charlotte Gray, a Scottish woman living in London during WWII. When her love interest, an RAF pilot, goes missing during a mission in occupied France, she volunteers with the Resistance movement, intent on finding her lost love. Her mission sends her behind enemy lines and gives her a first-hand look at the atrocities being committed by the Nazis. The film adaptation was released in 2001. Cate Blanchet expertly brought to life this espionage story wrapped in a romance. The film adaptation received stronger reviews: a rare occasion when maybe the movie was better than the book.



Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Set in London in 1973, John le Carré's modern classic is the fifth installment in the *George Smiley* series. When evidence of a Soviet mole in MI6 is discovered, there is only one man for the job of sleuthing out the spy. Smiley is brought out of retirement to serve Queen and Country by finding and destroying the mole. This slow-burn thriller was brought to the screen in 2011. Gary Oldman as George Smiley captures the complexities of le Carré's story. The film adaptation makes the list because it faithfully follows the original storyline of the book. If limited series adaptations are more to your taste, this one was also adapted to a seven-episode miniseries by BBC in 1979, and later aired in the U.S. in 1980.



The Lady Vanishes

Ethel Lina White's famous novel was originally published in 1936. A beautiful young socialite, Iris Carr, returns home to England after a vacation on the continent. On her journey, she encounters an intriguing woman known as Miss Froy. But the story takes an alarming turn when Miss Froy seemingly vanishes into thin air. And no one on the train remembers seeing her.

The original film adaptation was the work of genius Alfred Hitchcock and released in 1938. The film was so popular, it has been named among the best British films of the 20th century. A remake released in 1978 starring Cybill Shephard failed to live up to the original. More recently, a made-for-TV adaptation was released in 2013, and Hitchcock's original film was adapted for the stage in 2019. With so many adaptations, it's easy to see why this one is a classic.



Goldfinger

No spy novel list would be complete without 007. *Goldfinger* is Ian Fleming's seventh installment in the James Bond series. The story, originally published in 1959, is set in the UK. Bond's latest mission for the British Secret Service is to investigate the activities of gold smuggler Auric Goldfinger. Goldfinger is also suspected of having ties to Soviet counterintelligence. Bond uncovers a more sinister plot in the works.

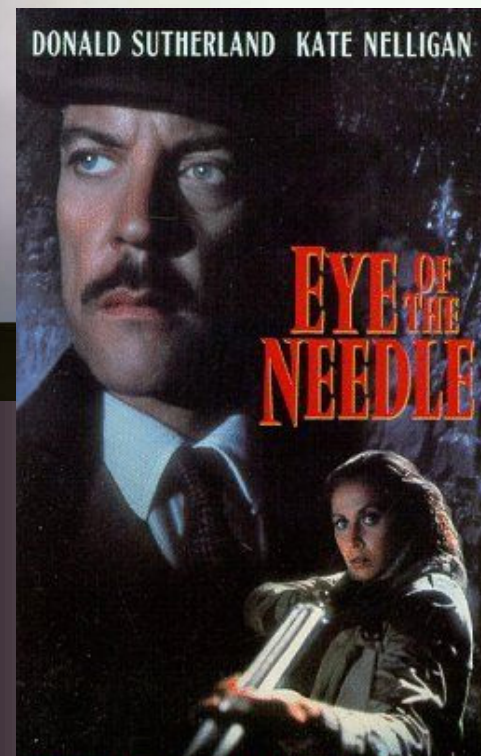
The film, starring Sir Sean Connery, was originally released in 1964 and was the first Bond film to win an Oscar. It was also the film that really put the Bond franchise on the map.



Argo

Argo is a real-life spy thriller detailing the story of CIA operative Antonio Mendez's mission to rescue American hostages from the embassy in Tehran, Iran, in 1979. The ordeal went on for more than a year, but six Americans were able to escape. Mendez then posed as a Hollywood producer scouting a site to film a fictitious movie to free the remaining hostages.

The book was adapted into a film in 2012, starring Ben Affleck. While the film received largely positive reviews, it did receive some criticism for downplaying the role the Canadian embassy played as well as exaggerating some of the facts. A Canadian documentary, *Our Man in Tehran*, was released in 2013, highlighting Kenneth Taylor's role in assisting the six Americans who escaped.



Eye of the Needle

Originally published in 1978 under the title *Storm Island*, this was the novel that launched the career of Welsh author Ken Follet. The book is set in 1940. A German spy code named The Needle holds the key to Nazi victory against the Allies. But he finds himself stranded on Storm Island, off the coast of Scotland. On the island, he develops a romance with Lucy, but their love affair takes a tragic turn.

The film adaptation *Eye of the Needle* was released in 1981, starring Donald Sutherland, to strong reviews from critics. It has become a classic of the genre.



Our Man in Havana

Our Man in Havana by Graham Greene was published in 1958, prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis. But elements of the book seemed to predict events to come. Greene himself worked for MI6, British intelligence, in the 1940s. The story pokes a bit of good-natured fun at the intelligence community. James Wormold, vacuum cleaner salesman turned spy, is tasked with gathering intelligence in Cuba, currently under the Batista regime. When he is unable to uncover anything to report back to Britain, he begins fabricating his reports.

This black comedy has been adapted to an opera and a play. The film adaptation was released in 1959, bringing the book's humor to life.

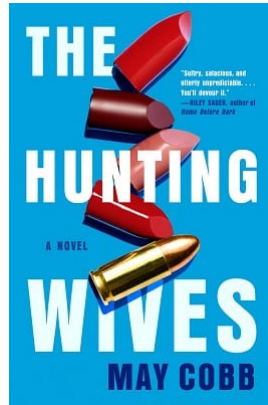
About the author



Heidi Slowinski is the author of two books in the mystery and suspense genre, *The House on Maple Street* and *The Package: A Novella*. She is also a book reviewer and blogger. Her website features a monthly short story contest, book reviews, and author interviews. When she isn't writing, her hobbies include travel, cooking, and painting watercolors.

Visit her website at heidislowinski.com and follow her on Instagram @hs.reads.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SPRING



The Hunting Wives

May Cobb

With friends like these, who needs enemies?

Sophie O'Neill and her husband and young son, originally from Chicago, are new to a small town in Texas. It was time for the family to get away from the hustle and bustle of suburbia. However, Sophie quickly finds herself bored. When she happens to come

across the Facebook profile of socialite Margot Banks, she is preoccupied by the thought of befriending her.

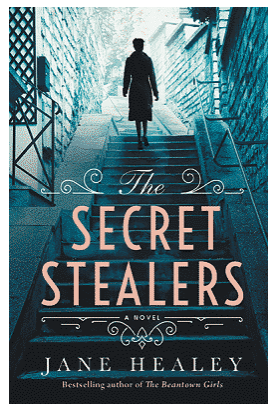
Sophie finally gets a chance to meet Margot and her elite friends at a fundraiser and finds out that they are members of a covert group called the Hunting Wives. Each Friday, the women shoot, drink heavily, and during Sophie's first shooting session with her new "friends," she realizes that the women like to hunt other things as well. When they're on the prowl, no man is safe from their charms.

It's all fun and games (and a bit scandalous to Sophie) until things take a turn for the worse. When a girl is found dead at the location of their shooting sessions, Sophie finds herself right in the middle of the investigation. That is when the twists really start. Who can she trust? And why would someone murder this young lady?

This is a wicked, dark, and juicy thriller that hooks readers from the very first page. The characters are definitely not very likable. Sophie seems to have no clue how she got herself into such a messy situation ... even though she is the one who puts herself there by making bad decision after bad decision. She's the kind of character one yells at while reading, "Oh, come on, Sophie! Use your brain!"

That also makes this a fun and compelling read, as the situations get worse and the twists continue. This is a fast-paced tale that ramps up pretty quickly. Readers will have a fun time trying to keep up with the shenanigans as they guess who could be a murderer, and why.

Reviewed by Michael David



The Secret Stealers

Jane Healey

Anna Cavanaugh is a recent widow, working as a French teacher in Washington, D.C. When a family friend, General William Donovan, invites her to join the Office of Strategic Services, Anna's life is completely turned upside down.

Soon, she is working behind enemy lines in France, clandestinely communicating with London about the Germans' plans. In constant danger, Anna and her female colleagues concoct rescue missions and reveal weapon blueprints to the home front, while at the same time trying to keep their real identities a secret.

Historical suspense author Jane Healey's newest novel, *The Secret Stealers*, is full of intrigue, suspense, and patriotism. Anna is an honest and realistic character, while at the same time being exceptionally brave and true to herself. Desperate to make a difference in the world, she takes on the biggest challenge of her life despite the danger, and despite the attitudes toward women both at

home and abroad. With the help of her friends, Anna is able to confront her fears and doubts and change the war effort for the Allied forces. She is relatable on every level, a "typical" female doing a "typical" job who is called to action in a huge way. This is literally the stuff that dreams are made of.

The story takes place mostly abroad, particularly in London and France, and Healey describes the beauty of these countries, but also the destruction caused by the war. Healey's novel is well-researched, and the fact that some of her characters were based on real people makes the novel even more awe-inspiring. Although *The Secret Stealers* is full of dangerous and clandestine missions and laden with destruction and death, it also manages to be uplifting and inspiring.

There are tear-filled reunions, nostalgic memories, and positive feelings about the future, which is exactly what you'd expect from a World War Two novel. As realistic and heart-wrenching as *The Secret Stealers* is, it highlights bravery and strength and reignites a faith in humanity.

Reviewed by Erin Clemence



Skystorm

Steven Konkoly

Skystorm by Steven Konkoly is shocking, suspenseful, alarming, and pulse-activating. It combines aspects of political, military, and action-adventure thrillers and is the fourth book in the Ryan Decker series.

Ryan Decker is a former CIA operative turned mercenary turned covert investigator that also takes shadow 'off

the books' missions for Senator Margaret Steele. In this case, Senator Steele knows that Apex Industries, the criminal enterprise that masquerades as a think tank, is once again up to no good. When a surveillance plane meets disaster after Steele uncovers an APEX operation code-named *Skystorm*, it is only the beginning. APEX goes after everyone. Will Senator Steele, Decker, his team and their families survive this onslaught?

This book is once again largely set in California and Washington D.C. but also takes the reader to Nicaragua, Texas, Oklahoma, and Nevada. It is exactly what you would expect from a well-written action thriller with lots of concern over how to protect one's family as well as some information on weapons, drones, and covert gear.

There was a lot more character development in this book for Ryan. I got sense of what he is like in the down

time between missions and what his hopes are for the future. I also got to know Harlow, Ryan's significant other, a lot better in this novel. Due to the large number of characters in the book, it helps to read this series in order. That way, a reader is not learning all of the secondary characters at once, but gradually over time.

There are several twists to the story, although a lot of the action and deductions are over-the-top. It was so full of action and excitement that it kept me turning the pages to find out what was going to happen next. I was kept fully invested in the mission becoming a success. But is that what happens?

Overall, this book was suspenseful, riveting, fast-paced, action-oriented, and entertaining. If you enjoy action thrillers that have both strong male and female characters, then this may be the series for you.

This is the fourth book that I have read by this author and the third in this series. I own five other books by Konkoly that I plan to read. He continues to bring great characters, entertaining story lines, and lots of action together in exhilarating novels. Steven Konkoly has become one of my favorite authors and I look forward to reading more from him. Will there be more in this series? I can't wait to find out what is next, whether it is another series or this one.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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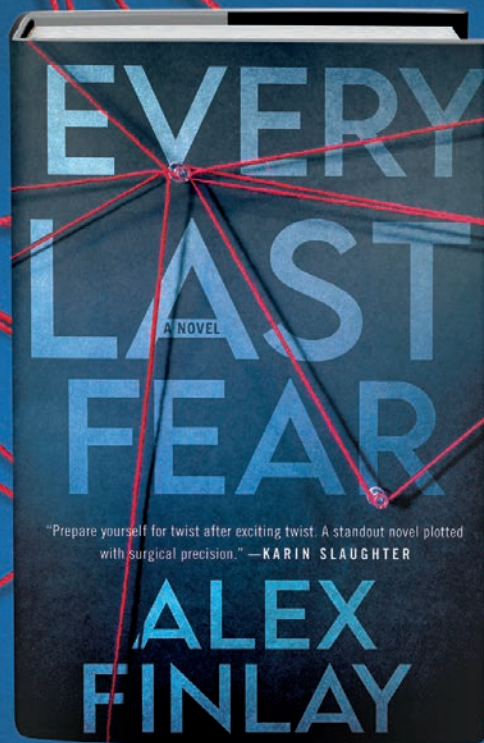
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The Shadow Man Helen Fields

After developing a strong DI Luc Callanach series, Helen Fields sets about dazzling her readers with yet another superb standalone novel. *The Shadow Man* is not only a great police procedural, but also pushes the genre to the limits with a truly unique serial killer.

Dr. Connie Woodwine has been called in to help work a case within Police Scotland's Major Investigation Team (MIT). An American, Woodwine brings her experience as a forensic psychologist to a baffling case and teams up with DI Brodie Baarda, based in Edinburgh. A woman's found slain in her bed and the best friend who had arrived to see her is kidnapped from the driveway. Woodwine and Baarda have no idea where to begin, as the forensics are scarce and the leads non-existent.

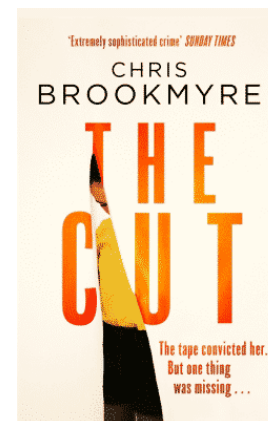
After word comes over the wire that a teenage girl was abducted in plain sight by a gangly, skeletal man outside a library, Woodwine and Baarda try to determine if this is another abduction or an extrapolation of their own case. Still, there is little on which to go, save the eerie description by another youth.

Meanwhile, in an undisclosed location, the two victims begin to see that they are playing parts in a sadistic game with a man who fancies himself already dead. His emaciated body is disgusting enough, but the play acting he has them perform while in captivity takes things to a whole new level. He almost encompasses the role as head of a family, one that meets his every needs. As the kidnapper continues to add to his brood, his more violent side comes out, making him a threat in an entirely new way.

Woodwine and Baarda begin to piece things together, though extremely slowly. It is nothing that will guarantee solving the case, but this sliver of information could help expand the search parameters, while they wrestle to comprehend the killer's physical and psychological anomalies. They'll need to stay on top of things if they hope to save those who have been taken and find justice for those whose lives have already been extinguished.

Woodwine's backstory adds depth. She suffered a brain injury as a teenager and ended up as an achromat, unable to see color whatsoever. Living her life in black, white, and shades of grey, Woodwine is able to get to the core of the case with her exceptional determination. Her banter with Baarda is a key element to the novel's success. This is a duo that works so well together, one can only imagine if it will spin into a series to rival DI Luc Callanach.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



The Cut Chris Brookmyre

The Cut opens with the discovery of a murder scene and then quickly steps back in time. Have we just seen how the story will end and is it now just a question of how we get there? Perhaps, but beware: this is a book that will require you keep your wits, be observant and read between the lines. Even then, it's difficult to predict how this one will play out.

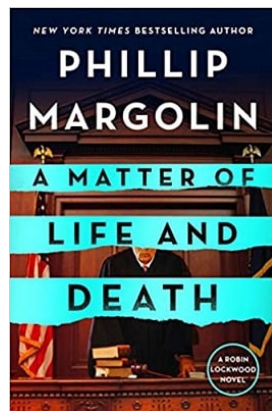
We're introduced to two people, both misfits in their own way. Jerry is a young man studying for a film and television degree at Glasgow University. He was brought up by his late grandmother in a village some thirty miles south of the city, his feckless mother having abandoned him early on. Having been lured into petty crime by a local hard case, he decided to leave that world behind following a burglary that went badly wrong. Though he enjoys his course, he's struggling to adapt to living alongside students from more affluent backgrounds. Millicent is a seventy-two-year-old former special effects make-up artist who has worked on numerous low-budget horror films. She's lost all of her confidence following a forced period of confinement. These days, just the thought of popping into a café to buy a cup of coffee is likely to induce panic.

When a house-sharing opportunity arises, Jerry finds himself thrown together with Millicent and two other elderly ladies. A shared love of films quickly cements a loose alliance between Jerry and Millicent. It's now that the skeletons in their respective closets start to rattle: the reason for Millicent's prior confinement is a timebomb while Jerry's lawbreaking past might catch up with him. The story goes into overdrive as events force the pair to take drastic action. Woven in is the search for a copy of a legendary horror film, apparently it's so scary that it was banned from release. What a tangled web this is.

The relationship between this young man and his much older sidekick is compelling. Readers will find themselves sympathetic to their plight; the dialogue between them is sharp and funny. The action comes thick and fast in the second half of the story as more characters are introduced. Though complex, the flow follows a logical enough path and, ultimately, the tale's clever dénouement successfully ties off most loose ends.

Chris Brookmyre is a fine writer. His successful series featuring investigative journalist Jack Parlabane is testament to his longevity, and his standalone novel *Fallen Angel* is a fantastic mystery. Here he provides a gripping storyline replete with expertly drawn characters, a good helping of dark humor, and a plotline intricate enough to satisfy even the most avid armchair sleuth.

Reviewed by Andrew Smith



A Matter of Life and Death

Phillip Margolin

Attorney-turned-author Phillip Margolin returns with his fourth book in the *Robin Lockwood* series. And this time Robin is faced with a murder trial that carries the distinct possibility of a death sentence.

This page-turner gives us down-and-out Joe Lattimore, reduced to living in a tent city

in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and infant daughter. Things appear desperate for this former boxer whose temper kept him from holding a job as a cook after his boxing days were over. He has no job, no prospects, and no way to provide for his family, until one night a man recognizes him from his boxing days and offers him the chance to make \$300 in an illegal no-holds-barred fight.

Joe agrees and the action picks up. He's soon whisked away to a secret location where he matches against an obviously impaired opponent. The crowd wants blood, and shortly Joe is pummeling this opponent to the point where he has to stop because the other man is seriously hurt. More than hurt. Joe's opponent is dead, and Joe is quickly hustled away.

Things go downhill from there. Joe burgles a home to steal jewelry from a safe. When he gets inside, he sees a dead body and runs away, but his fingerprints are in the house. To make things worse, the decedent is the wife of a rather unlikeable judge.

Robin Lockwood, a private practitioner, agrees to handle the case and is plunged into an underworld of violence and crime while hoping to find out what really happened and track the true killer.

This book is lean in all the right ways: almost devoid of unnecessary prose, and light on all the typical trial preparation, motions, investigations, and shoddy police work in order to quickly get us to the most important parts of the story.

This is a fast-paced and action-packed story that, while sparse on legal details, has enough legal and investigative insights to make a plausible and successful mystery. The pages seem to fly by as we follow Lattimore, Lockwood, prostitutes, judges, bikers, and gangsters to a breathless conclusion.

Reviewed by Blaine DeSantis



The Last Exit

Michael Kaufman

It's 2033 and America has big problems. Unemployment has soared due to automation, climate change has devastated the environment, smoke from constant fires pollutes the atmosphere, and a fatal neurological disease called Rapid Onset Spongiform Encephalitis (ROSE)—similar to mad cow

disease—is killing people who reach middle age.

Pharmaceutical companies respond to the ROSE epidemic by developing a preventative drug that not only wards off the spongiform encephalitis, but also extends a person's life span into the hundreds. With ongoing plastic surgery, a one-hundred-year-old-plus person can look thirty-five for decades. The medicine is very costly, however, and available only to the privileged ultra-wealthy.

There is an alternative, however. A less costly version of the ROSE-prevention drug extends life for a few decades, but with a catch. People can only get the medicine if their parents agree to be euthanized (exit) at the age of 65. Moreover, drug recipients must be childless and are sterilized upon treatment. So recipients of the inferior drug avoid spongiform encephalitis and live into their nineties, but lose their parents and have no children.

Still, many people want to take advantage of the cheaper medicine and convince or coerce their parents to exit. They even sometimes kill them if they refuse. There are discussions about the ethics of letting (or encouraging) parents to exit, but much of the population seems to be on board.

To reduce parental mistreatment, the Washington D.C. Metro Police has an Elder Abuse Unit that deals with people bullying, beating, or murdering their mothers and fathers. Chinese-American Detective Jennifer Lu is part of this unit and is called to the scene when parents are being harassed or threatened.

In addition, as part of an experimental program to improve police performance, Jen has an artificial intelligence (AI) unit implanted into her brain. The AI unit can access police files, scan the internet, and see and hear everything Jen sees and hears. Jen's AI, called Chandler, functions as a voice in her head, and the duo discuss evidence, lines of investigation, suspects, perpetrators, and so on.

Chandler can be turned off when Jen's not working, but he takes an interest in her personal life and sometimes asks to be left on when Jen visits her ailing mother, sees her boyfriend Zach, or goes to parties. Chandler has a cheeky personality, which adds a touch of fun to the story.

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Jen has a flesh-and-blood partner named Les who also has an AI unit. Together, Jen, Les, and their respective AIs form an efficient foursome.

The book's plot revolves around Jen's suspicion that a black-market version of the cheap ROSE-prevention drug, called Eden, is available. People with access to the illegal medicine could presumably have parents over 65 and families of their own. However, when Jen mentions Eden to her boss, Captain Brooks, he insists there's no such thing and orders Jen not to investigate.

Soon afterward, the U.S. has an epidemic of young people getting sick and dying within a week, appearing shriveled and one-hundred years old. Jen suspects this has something to do with Eden and decides to look into the matter against Captain Brooks's orders. Jen's inquiries involve breaking and entering; interviewing witnesses; going to secret meetings; surveilling suspects; and more.

It turns out there's a cabal of sinister conspirators at work, and Jen endangers her life in an effort to expose them.

This is a compelling science fiction-detective story, just the thing for readers who want something different.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer

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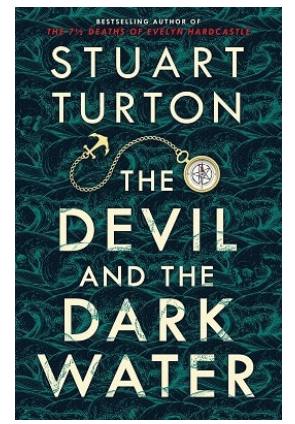


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The Devil and the Dark Water
Stuart Turton

A brilliant mystery. A rollicking sea adventure. An eerie supernatural tale.

With *The Devil and the Dark Water*, Stuart Turton has hit the ball clear out of the park. As a follow-up to his bestselling 2018 debut *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, his sophomore effort is an absolute stunner.

The year is 1634. Samuel Pippis, the world's greatest detective, is imprisoned on a ship bound for Amsterdam, where he will be tried and executed for an unknown crime upon his arrival. Also on the ship is Arent Hayes, Sammy's friend and personal bodyguard, and Sara Wessel, a high-ranking noblewoman with a secret plan of her own.

Shortly after departure, the ship is plagued with strange events of a demonic nature. A sail is marked with a malevolent symbol, a dead leper haunts the passageways, and livestock are slaughtered. And the passengers hear the whisper of an evil voice in the night, tempting them with their innermost desires and foretelling three unholy miracles that will bring nothing but death and destruction.

With Sammy locked away in a cell, it is up to Arent and Sara to investigate the mystery of the demon—and stop it before the ship and all its passengers are doomed.

In short, the novel is a paranormal Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie mash-up. We have the ingenious Sherlockian detective duo of Sammy and Arent and also a large cast of nefarious characters, similar to what is often seen in Christie's novels. We have the dryly sarcastic humor and scientific logic of Holmes, as well as Christie's trademark red herrings and elements of the more intuitive detective work of her infamous Hercule Poirot.

And we have the exceptional writing skills of Stuart Turton to tie it all together.

The mystery is smart and extensively complex. Turton does an amazing job of gradually adding characters into the narrative and giving each one a memorable personality. (Plus, there's a handy Passenger and Crew Manifest in the front of the novel if names become jumbled.)

With plenty of mini-twists along the way, readers will enjoy the novel straight through to its grand and satisfying conclusion. Hands down, *The Devil and the Dark Water* is clever and fun. Addictively page-turning. And so very, very entertaining.

What a dreadful mistake it would be to miss it.

Reviewed by Melissa Buehner



2021

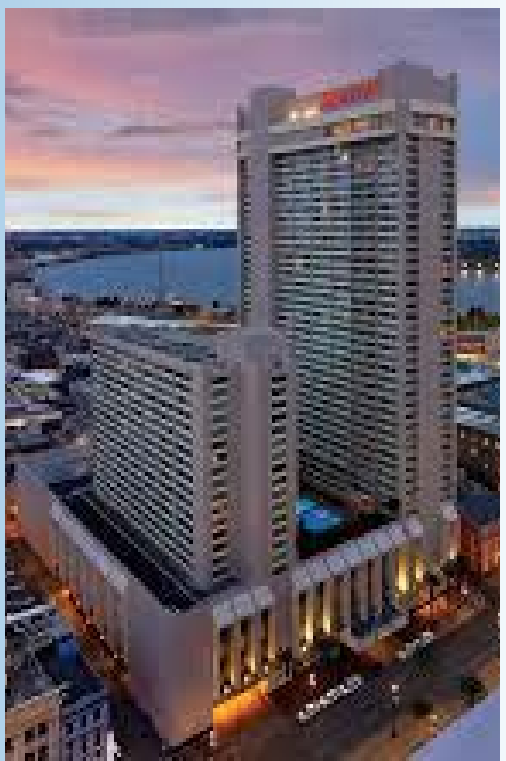
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