

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

Nº03 - SUMMER 2021
\$4.99

MAGAZINE

TEENAGE WASTELAND

Why we're hooked on
YA apocalyptic thrillers

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**Feature: The Villains of
Romantic Suspense**
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Author Q&A: Chris Bohjalian
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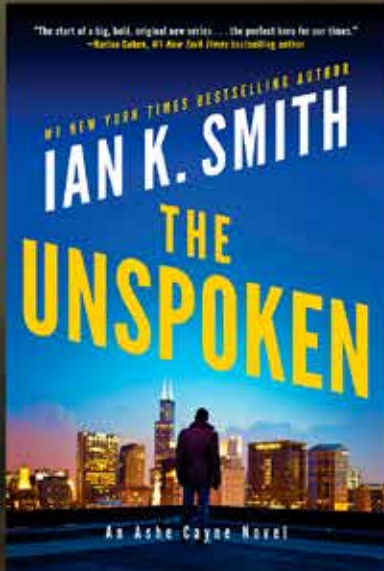
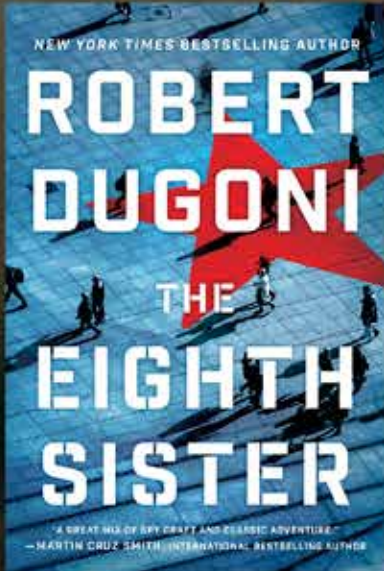
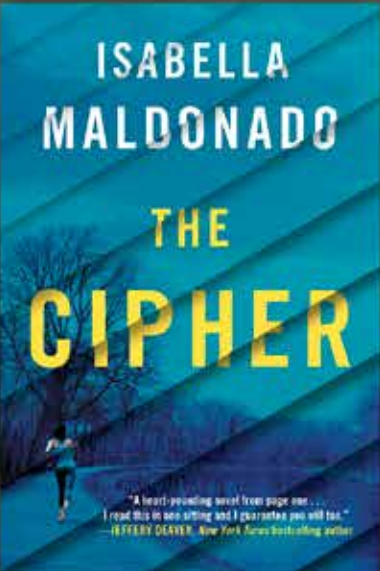
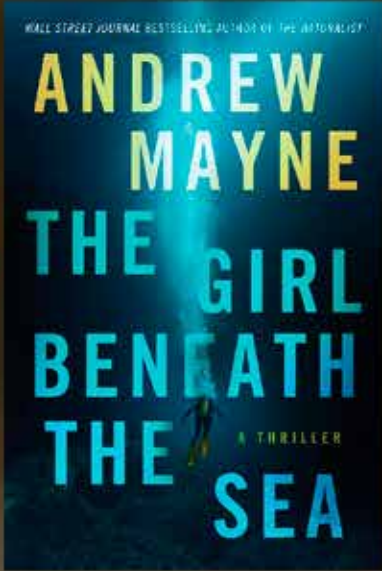
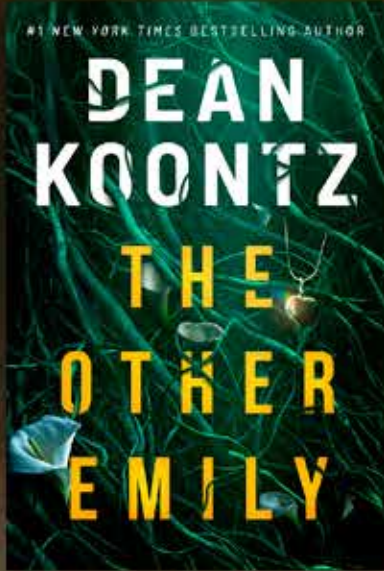
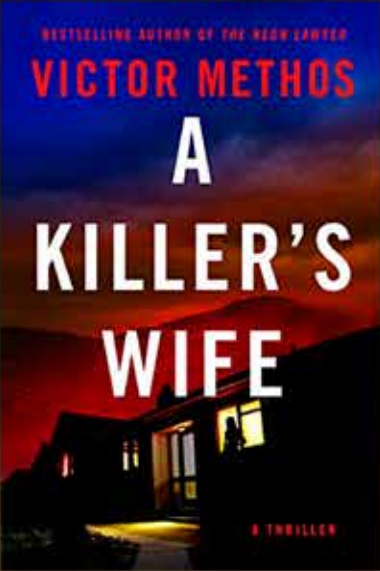
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**Short Fiction:
"There's Good Money in It"**
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This summer, we could all use something new and different



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

Summer is finally here, and it's going to be a great one. A time to shake off the cobwebs of way too much time spent inside. Maybe head to the beach with a book, or even pick up some reading for a long-awaited flight to somewhere new and different.

We could all use a little *new and different*. That's why we've got an eclectic mix of mystery and suspense books and authors in this quarter's magazine. New, like debut author T.J. Newman's *Falling*. Different, like cats in mysteries. (Why do dogs get all the attention?)

Here's to hoping that this summer you get out and try something new. Maybe it's that road trip you put off, or that visit with friends and family you haven't seen in far too long. No matter what it is, I hope it introduces a thrill to your life every bit as much as the books you love to read.

Well, maybe not *that* much of a thrill.

All the best,
Sam

Mystery & Suspense Magazine
Portland, Oregon
MysteryandSuspense.com

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CATS

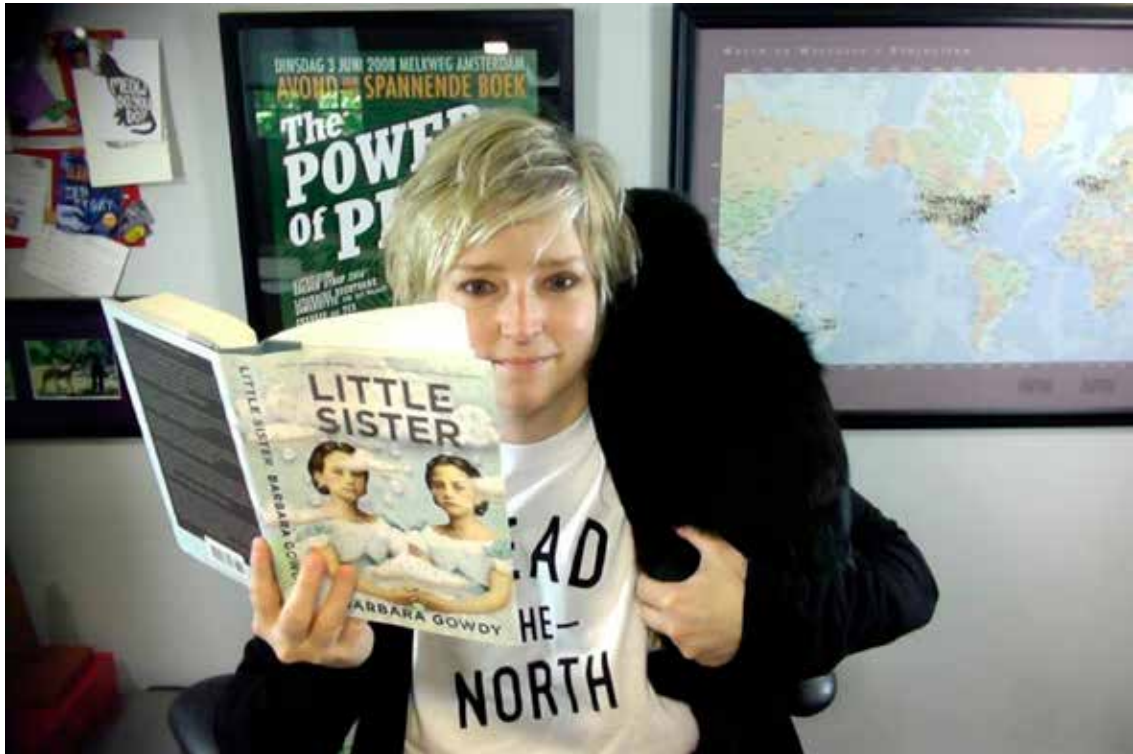
IN MYSTERIES AND THRILLERS

BY JUDITH ERWIN

“Man needing money to avoid home foreclosure conspired to rob and murder a lawyer and frame the victim’s cat for the homicide.”

While the above may sound like a cozy cat mystery, it's a true story of a crime that took place in Illinois. The would-be killer received a sentence of twenty years in a federal prison, which goes to show that cats have a place in our favorite mystery and thriller novels.

In the aforementioned case, the villain planned to kill the cat. However, Clea Simon, author of five cozy-mystery series that center on cats, believes a cat should never be the victim. “Don't kill the cat,” she professes. To drive home the point, she cites a time when she stopped reading a novel by a popular author because a cat was killed. Simon immediately put down the book and never read another by the same author.



New York Times bestselling author Karin Slaughter and cat

Bestselling and award-winning authors are quick to agree. Cat-loving author Karin Slaughter, whose 2021 book *False Witness* introduces a cat named Binx, says, “I’m one-hundred percent against a cat (or any animal) being injured in any way, shape, or form. I think it says more about the author than the cat—mainly that the author doesn’t have the intelligence to communicate with cats on their own level.”

The author of more than twenty bestselling thriller mysteries believes dogs are easy, but says, “With cats, you have to earn their respect every single day. They don’t care if you were good yesterday. What have you done for them today?”

SPARE THE CAT

Award-winning mystery author and literary agent Paula Munier, who recently released *The Hiding Place*, the third book in her Mercy Carr mystery series, also does not approve of killing a cat or seriously harming any animal. She says, “The bomb-sniffing Malinois Elvis and the search-and-rescue Newfoundland-retriever mix Susie Bear in my Mercy Carr series both do jobs that can be dangerous, and they sometimes suffer ill effects as a result—but I draw the line at any serious harm. I don’t think readers would ever forgive me if anything happened to either of them. And I certainly would not forgive myself!”

As for the cats, Munier says, “In my books felines are always being rescued by my heroine Mercy Carr, her grandmother Patience, who’s a veterinarian, and the Cat Ladies, who run a local shelter for cats.”

However, Munier points out a negative era in cat history. “Of course cats have been associated with witches, and both women and cats have been persecuted over the years. One of my own forebears was accused of being a witch during the

famous Salem Witch Trials. So, I feel strongly that misogyny and ailurophobia often go hand and hand and should be acknowledged and denounced.”

RULES UNWRITTEN

Victor DiGenti, author of the Windrusher suspense series, which features a cat, believes cats have become easy targets for victimization in films because of the emotional bonds we have with them. “The plot device is used to horrify the audience when cats are tortured or killed, as was the stray cat taken in by Mikael Blomkvist in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. It’s a common trope to show a vicious killer waiting in the shadows, the victim unaware of the danger, with the camera lingering on a helpless tabby, and thinking this will not end well for the poor feline?”

“There is an unwritten rule most writers tend to follow not to cause permanent harm to children and dogs,” he continues, “but that doesn’t seem to apply to cats, who are treated as more disposable. Stephen King broke the rule when a family’s cat is run over by a car and killed. But he brought it back to life in one of his creepiest books, *Pet Sematary*.”

However, when DiGenti allowed an evil cat to meet a tragic end in *Windrusher*, the first book in his series, he saw a reaction. “Even though I characterized Bolt as a nasty creature, I still heard from readers who were dismayed that I didn’t find a way to modify Bolt’s violent nature and let him live.”

GETTING COZY

In examining the history of felines in mystery, Edgar Allan Poe’s 1843 short story “The Black Cat” may have been the first to introduce a cat into mystery. However, Lillian Jackson Braun’s *The Cat Who Could Read Backwards*, published in

1966, kicked off the popularity of the cozy cat mystery. In total, Braun wrote twenty-nine books in the series. Rita Mae Brown followed in 1990 with her introduction of the first Mrs. Murphy book, *Wish You Were Here*, co-authored by Brown’s cat, Sneaky-Pie Brown. Her thirtieth book in the series is scheduled for release in October.

While Braun and Brown are to cat cozies what Agatha Christie is to standard cozies, many more authors have come onboard, including Clea Simon, Miranda James, Sofie Kelly, T.C. LoTempio, CeeCee James, Sofie Ryan, Laurie Cass, and Leann Sweeney, to name a few. Type “cozy cat mysteries” into the Goodreads search bar and approximately two-hundred results come up, most with outstanding reviews. The cats are Siamese, tabby, tuxedo, Persian, Maine coon, or other, while their human protagonists may be a journalist, postmistress, ex-crime reporter, librarian, witch ... you name it. In some, the cats talk. But all have dead bodies with mysteries to be solved.

“Readers of cozies are comfortable with the amateur sleuth solving the mystery, sometimes with the help of their cat. But they expect any violence to be downplayed or committed offstage,” says DiGenti. “On the other hand, readers of contemporary mysteries, suspense, and thrillers are looking for grittier, more violent fare, and while a cat may make an occasional appearance as a household pet or stray, they usually don’t play a major role in the plot. For example, my first Quint Mitchell Mystery, *Matanzas Bay*, introduced readers to Quint, a private detective, and his two pets, a yellow lab named Bogie and a cat named Dudley. After their introduction early in the book, they are hardly mentioned at all as Quint pursues a killer in St. Augustine.”

A review of authors in the genre reveals most are women. Asked why he believes so many of the writers are female, DiGenti says, “I suppose we can generalize and say the vast majority of cozy readers are women, and perhaps women are more emotionally attuned, as cat lovers, to write for that audience.”

When asked for book recommendations, Karin Slaughter says, “Sneaky Pie Brown is definitely at the top of the list. I got to meet Sneaky Pie Brown a few years ago, and it was one of the highlights of my life. (Rita Mae Brown was alright, too.)” According to Slaughter, the author gives ZERO credence to ranking systems or awards. “The lady is solving crimes because she’s good at it, not because she wants the glory. (I literally heard her say this.)” Another book in a different genre that made an impression on Slaughter is *Quake Cats*, about the cats of Christchurch, New Zealand, who survived a devastating earthquake. But she warns, “Be prepared to cry.”

Paula Munier also favors Rita Mae Brown and Caroline Haines but adds, “My new fave author is Elly Griffiths. If you haven’t read her wonderful Ruth Galloway traditional mysteries, you’ll love Ruth and her cat Flint.”

As for DiGenti, his favorite is a fantasy cat cozy by Shirley Rousseau Murphy titled *The Catswold Portal*.

ON THE BIG SCREEN

While cat cozy mysteries are plentiful, mystery films featuring a cat are scarce. The 1965 Disney film *That Darn Cat*, based on the book *Undercover Cat* by Gordon and Mildred Gordon, was a huge box-office success. In the story, a hostage scratches a plea for help on the collar of D.C., the cat,

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“Of course cats have been associated with witches, and both women and cats have been persecuted over the years ... misogyny and ailurophobia often go hand and hand and should be acknowledged and denounced.”



Author and literary agent Paula Munier with feline friend

who carries the message to rescuers. Disney also produced a film featuring characters from Rita Mae Brown’s Mrs. Murphy series, *Murder She Purred*. Blythe Danner provided the voice for the feline, Mrs. Murphy.

As to recommendations for films featuring cats, Munier loved Tao in *The Incredible Journey* and D.C. in *That Darn Cat*, which she attributes in part to her first cat at the age of six being a Siamese named Johnny Bonny Munier. “I also loved Pyewacket in the film *Bell, Book, and Candle* (based on the Broadway play by John Van Druten), Cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* by Truman Capote (and the film version, which is considerably different from the novella), and of course the tiger Richard Parker in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*.”

DiGenti added two other films. “*Alien* had cats slinking through various scenes, and in the first *Men in Black* film, an orange cat held the secret to the galaxy in his collar.”

Slaughter says, “*Hocus Pocus* is a lost gem. My sister and I used to quote our favorite line to each other: ‘Why was I cursed with such idiot sisters!’” However, she doesn’t understand why *John Wick* wasn’t about a cat. “I think it would’ve

made all the murder and vengeance all that more understandable.”

In looking at why cats are rare in film, WGA screenwriter Sharon Y. Cobb says, “A professional screenwriter must be clear about the reason she needs a cat or any animal in her story. Many times, it’s to help soften a lead character. But having a cat in the cast can be expensive. There are rules and regulations involving the American Humane Association. Also, the film production must find an animal trainer with a cat that is comfortable on set and well-trained.” Cobb recently completed a script for an L.A. director who asked her to add a cat. Cobb says she is looking forward to visiting the set this fall to see how the trainer gets the cat to perform.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CATS

While cats in cozy mysteries are exceedingly popular, the second-most popular pet in the U.S. appears less often in contemporary mysteries, thrillers, and suspense novels. Although dismissed by many as nothing more than furry companions to lonely women, the feline has a far more interesting past.

Historically, cats were worshiped as gods by the ancient Greeks (the cats haven't forgotten), feared and abused as witch-craft consorts in Medieval Europe, valued for centuries as protectors of food supplies on the high seas, and honored as war heroes. For proof of the latter, check out Simon, the tuxedo cat awarded the Dickin Medal (the animal equivalent of the British Victoria Cross). Simon continued to perform his duty of killing rodents despite incurring serious injuries when the HMS Amethyst fell under attack. His heroic act preserved the rations for sailors aboard the trapped vessel. More recently, the modern cat has been shown to calm those with severe anxiety, such as some autistic children and people suffering panic attacks.

Authors like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemmingway, Samuel Johnson, Raymond Chandler, Patricia Highsmith, and Dorothy L. Sayers were devoted cat lovers, as are Dan Brown, Neil Gaiman, Joyce Carol Oates, and Gillian Flynn.

In the Golden Age of the 1930s, cats frequently factored into mystery fiction, often in gruesome or sinister ways. Even Agatha Christie incorporated a cat into her short story “The Strange Case of Sir Arthur Carmichael,” as did Dorothy L. Sayers in “The Cyprian Cat.”



Author Victor DiGenti with cat

MISSING IN THE MODERN MYSTERY

But why aren't felines found more often in contemporary mystery novels?

“Most contemporary thrillers take on social issues and criminal justice, two things that cats are just not interested in,” says Karin Slaughter. “Now, if you want to get into trust and estate planning, you'll find cats everywhere. Everyone knows the reason cats choose not to speak to us is because they are afraid we'll force them to pay taxes.”

Paula Munier says she is not sure why the cat is not used more, but believes this could change. “Eventually an author will write a compelling non-cozy crime story with a cat at the forefront, and that will usher in a rush of similar titles. Here's hoping that happens sooner rather than later!” Munier has said in the past that if an author could write a story from the point of view of the dog or a cat and pull it off, she would immediately sign the writer. “If you can do it, contact me!”

As far as a cat's best role in a mystery, Slaughter says, “The best way to introduce a cat is to have it ruin something, thus solving the crime: using its paw to push the murder weapon onto the floor, clawing open a couch with a stash of drugs inside, or the cat's old standby: horking up a hairball to clear the room.” Slaughter has no problem with the cat being a villain. “If anything, it makes me love them more. They had a choice. They chose evil.”

However, Munier believes a cat can play hero or villain, but does not personally like the cat as a villain. “Cats are heroes in my book(s),” she says. “More and more authors are giving their protagonists pets, just as more and more of us are sharing our lives with animals. Cats make terrific companions; they're smart and self-reliant. They're compassionate, too—and sometimes I think they don't get enough credit for that compassion.

DiGenti believes the cat is versatile. “Today's house cat tends to be a bit of a shapeshifter depending on one's perspective, so it can easily fill the role of protagonist, antagonist, helpful ally, or helpless victim. ... With some 90 million of them, 34 percent of them in U.S. homes (according to *Smithsonian* magazine), you'll find as many people who claim to either actively dislike the feline critters or identify solely as dog people. Dogs are indeed admired as man's best friend, while the cat is more independent and mysterious, adding to either their allure for cat lovers or giving cat haters even

more reason to avoid them. So, cats fit easily into any of the character archetypes the author chooses. I chose to celebrate the cat's independent spirit when I wrote my Windrusher series, imbuing my protagonist, Windrusher, and most cats, with mystical powers to communicate through an internet of the mind while they slept. And since cats sleep up to eighteen hours a day, this was a convenient device to add drama to the story.”

ON THE EDITOR'S DESK

With reference to the attitude of editors and publishers toward cats, Slaughter says she believes there's an anti-dog bias that she considers fair. “Read a book along with a dog and you'll see what I mean. They will invariably eat it. A cat—worse case is they're going to lay across it or clean their butt on it, but mostly, they'll sit in your lap and let you read.” Slaughter went on to say that her editor doesn't like Betty, the chihuahua, belonging to Will Trent of her Will Trent series. “But she was all in favor when I told her that Will has been secretly feeding all the stray cats in his neighborhood.”

Munier says, “Editors are dog and cat people, too. Especially cats. Weaving animal characters into your story is almost always a plus. Protagonists with feline and/or canine companions are by definition likable. And likable protagonists sell. Not to mention the plot possibilities.”

She says that during the pandemic, with communication limited to online and everyone subject to the blues, she sent photos along with her communications. “I found that sending along photos of Ursula the cat for the cat people and Blondie our pandemic puppy for the dog people really brightens their day.” According to Munier, they responded in kind with photos of their own animals.

COMING SOON TO A BOOK NEAR YOU

In commenting on their newest releases, Slaughter gave a peek at the cat in *False Witness*. “Binx, like most cats concerned about taxes, does not speak, but he provides an outlet for Callie, his person, to think her thoughts. He's loosely based on my black cat, Dexter, who chortles and purrs a lot, and also reaches up his arms toward me when he wants to be picked up. I've seen babies do this, but it's more adorable when a cat does it.”

Munier says that all of the cats in her books, as in her life,

are rescues. “Patience, Mercy's grandmother, is a veterinarian who's always taking in cats; they curl up on the long window seat in her Victorian house. Everyone in town knows that you can drop off unwanted dogs and cats at her front door any time, no questions asked—and a cardboard box full of kittens left on Patience's porch plays a role in the mystery in *The Hiding Place*.” To find out more, she says, “You'll have to read the novel.”

While DiGenti has not written a fourth installment to the Windrusher series, he is leaving the door open. He is currently working on a standalone novel.

In closing, Slaughter's final comment on the subject of cats in mysteries was, “From a writing perspective, anytime you give a character a pet, you're sending out the signal that the character is a good person. Which is weird, because nasty people have animals they love, too, but I think we all want to believe that only good people are capable of that kind of deep, endless love.”

Munier expressed her final thoughts, saying, “I've always said that the way to get through a New England winter is with a cat on your lap and a dog at your feet.”

Final note, cat lover or not, be sure to get a copy of *False Witness* by Karin Slaughter, *The Hiding Place* by Paula Munier, and a Windrusher book by Victor DiGenti.

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“The best way to introduce a cat is to have it ruin something, thus solving the crime: using its paw to push the murder weapon onto the floor, clawing open a couch with a stash of drugs inside, or the cat's old standby: horking up a hairball to clear the room.”

About the author

Judith Erwin is the author of seven books, including the Shadow of Dance series, three standalone novels, and *Capitol Murder*, Book 1 of the Shepherd & Associates series. She won a Florida Authors and Publishers Association gold medal for her romantic suspense novel, *The Studio*, also a finalist in the international Readers' Favorite Book Awards. Her romantic novel *Shadow of Doubt* was a Royal Palm Literary Awards finalist. A retired attorney and freelance writer, her work has been published in numerous periodicals. A native of Atlanta, Georgia, she lives and writes in North Florida. Learn more at juditherwinofficialwebsite.com.





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Photo credit: Victoria Blewe

Chris Bohjalian

Chris Bohjalian is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of twenty-one books. His work has been translated into thirty-five languages and three times become movies. His latest novel, *Hour of the Witch*, was released in May. It’s a novel of historical suspense set in 1662 Boston, a tale of the first divorce in North America for domestic violence—and a subsequent witch trial.

Q. *Hour of the Witch* came out May 4 behind a wave of anticipation. What does 1662 Boston have to teach a modern reader about human relationships and society?

Chris: Indoor plumbing has made the world a better place. So have electric lights and stairs to second floors. Also, no good ever comes from hanging people as witches.

Obviously there is more to it than that: it’s a great question.

The Puritans came here with what—in their minds—was a noble goal: to build a city upon a hill that the world would smile upon and make their God proud. Instead they started the genocide of the indigenous people who lived here, and showed every day that good intentions are no match for the robust hypocrisies and contradictions that live within the human heart. Human relationships are always going to be fraught and the human soul is always going to be fragile. We are always going to make mistakes.

And we are at our best when we understand that and are capable of saying either, “I was wrong, forgive me.”

Or, “I forgive you. There’s a reasonable process and we’ll get past this.”

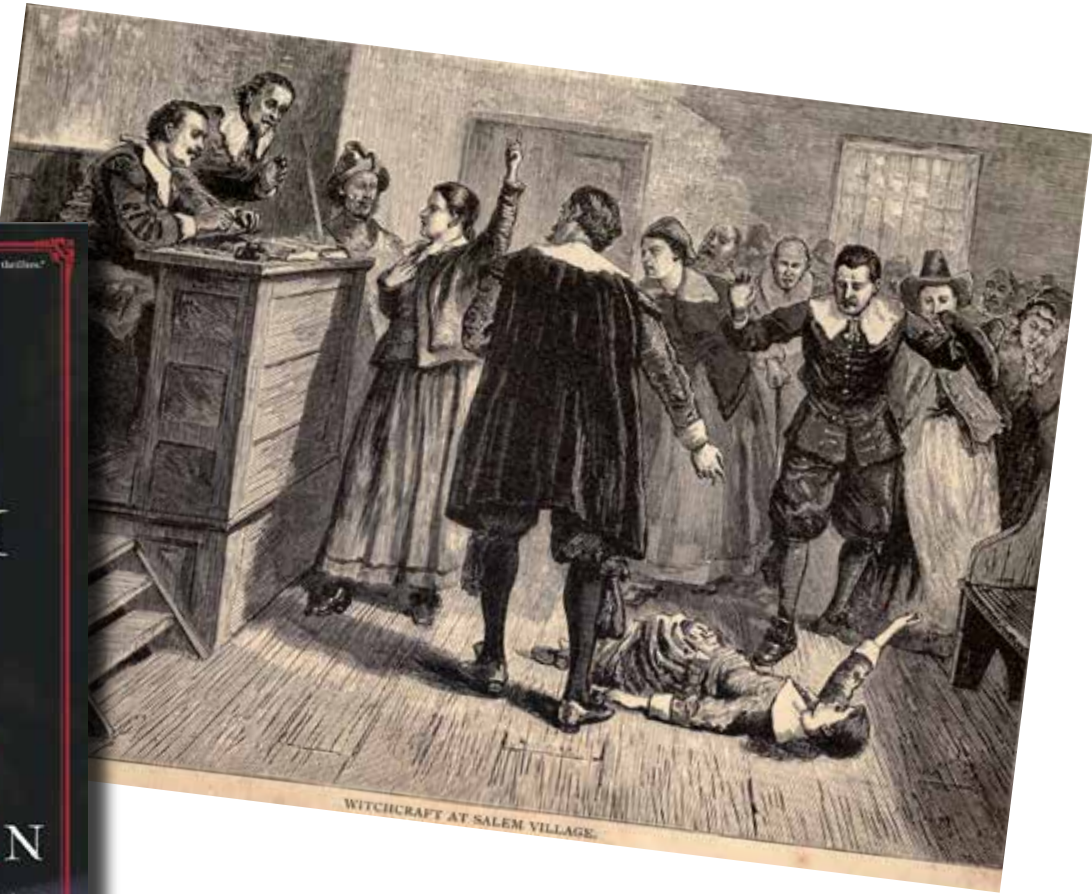
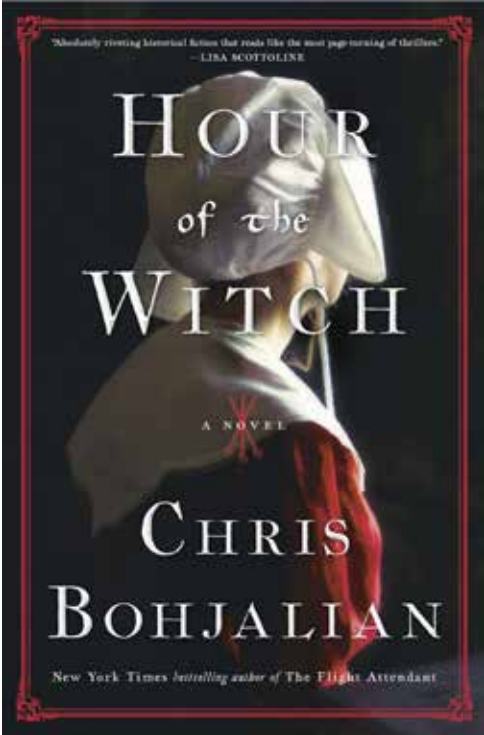
When the Puritans were at their best, they did those things. When they were at their worst? Well, it wasn’t pretty. Let’s face it, they used the stocks the way we use Twitter: for public shaming.

Q. You’ve said elsewhere that no matter what you’re writing about, you need to be passionately interested in the topic. What passion inspired you to write this book?

Chris: *Hour of the Witch* is set in 1662, but it is—by design—among the most timely novels I’ve ever written.

I wanted the novel to feel as authentic and historically accurate as possible, and I used as my rhythmic touchstones the poetry of Anne Bradstreet and the King James Bible.

But I also know that readers won’t miss the reference when a member of Boston’s all-male Court of Assistants calls my heroine, Mary Deerfield, “a nasty woman.”



The novel was inspired, in part, by the first divorce in North America for domestic violence. In 1672, Nanny Naylor was granted a divorce due to “cruelty.”

But it was also inspired by America’s first witch hunts: the governor of Massachusetts had his own sister-in-law hanged as a witch in 1656, and Hartford was hanging women six years later for witchcraft—which was three decades before Salem.

So, I think the passion that had me at my desk every morning was the notion that there were colossal injustices being rained down upon seventeenth-century women such as Mary because they were smart and opinionated, and simply had had enough of the awful men around them.

I love that some early readers have referred to the novel as “*The Crucible* meets *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

Q. Your research for every book is famously thorough. (Take, for example, the example of the sixty-five interviews you reportedly conducted for *Midwives*.) What research did you undertake for *Hour of the Witch*?

Chris: Researching a novel set in the 1660s is very different from researching one set in the 1980s. The vast majority of the research I did for *Midwives* was talking to people: I interviewed midwives, nurse-midwives, ob-gyns, defense lawyers, prosecutors, Vermont’s chief medical examiner, and (of course) moms and dads who had their babies at home. I was very grateful to count among my

friends midwife Carol Warnock, who was gracious and patient and wise beyond belief. Yes, there were lots of clinical books and articles I read, but most of the research involved lengthy conversations and follow-up conversations.

But for a novel set in 1662, it was almost entirely reading. I have been interested in Puritan theology and the Puritan mind—which is a lot more interesting than you might suppose—since college. When we imagine the New England Puritans, we envision a stodgy group that wore black and hanged people as witches. (Arguably, that’s not a totally unfair characterization.) But they were a lot more complicated than that. They drank more beer than Miami during spring break and their table manners were likely atrocious because they didn’t use forks: the three-tined implement just starting to gain favor in Europe was a tad too reminiscent of the Devil’s trident. And they lived in a world where Satan was as real as your neighbor, and fretted constantly over one critical question: am I saved or damned?

And they also weren’t nearly as dour as we suppose. The beautiful poetry of Anne Bradstreet is one remarkable example. Their clothing wasn’t all black. And while adultery was a capital crime, no one was ever actually executed for it. It happened.

So, my research included the primary sources, which were lots of diaries and poems and memoirs. The Puritans

were rigorous with their ledgers. And it involved secondary sources: analyses of their lives by historians. The acknowledgments of the novel includes many of the books and articles on which I depended, some of which I have had since college.

But I do have to give a shoutout to one person I interviewed a lot: L. Kinvin Wroth, professor emeritus of law at Vermont Law School. We first had lunch in the summer of 2001—twenty years ago—when I reached out to him to discuss the novel I was contemplating about a Puritan woman’s attempt to divorce her husband. He pointed out to me the articles it was critical I read about seventeenth-century law and the first New England courts. He read a draft of the novel and patiently corrected my most egregious mistakes. I will always recall fondly our lunches over decades in South Royalton, Vermont.

Q. Your novel, *The Flight Attendant*, is now an HBO TV series starring Kaley Cuoco. What was the adaptation process like on your end? What has your reaction been to that show's success?

Chris: Oh, my gosh, I love the TV series: every moment and every beat. From the second Kaley Cuoco reached out six months before the novel was published because she wanted to play flight attendant Cassie Bowden, it’s been a dream. I knew Kaley—who is an amazing human being and a brilliant actor—would be perfect for the role. Cassie is an alcoholic hot mess who makes terrible decisions, but there are reasons why she is the way she is: her childhood was one trauma after another. And Kaley walks the tightrope between heartbreak and hilarity with utter perfection. She IS Cassie Bowden.

And I love what show runner Steve Yockey and producers, such as Suzanne McCormack, have done to adapt the novel for television. They are just so freaking smart and found the

perfect tone: it feels often like Hitchcock at his best. They also assembled a great team, with directors such as Susanna Fogel and Marcos Siega, and an unbelievable cast. Every word from Griffen Matthews’s mouth is gold. Same with Zosia Mamet. And Michiel Huisman and Rosie Perez are just riveting.

Now we have season two to look forward to. I can’t wait.

Q. Who are some of your favorite writers, in and out of your genres?

Chris: Most of my friends are writers, so I always try to step cooly around this question. I don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings.

But I read a lot of historical fiction, contemporary literature, thrillers, and history.

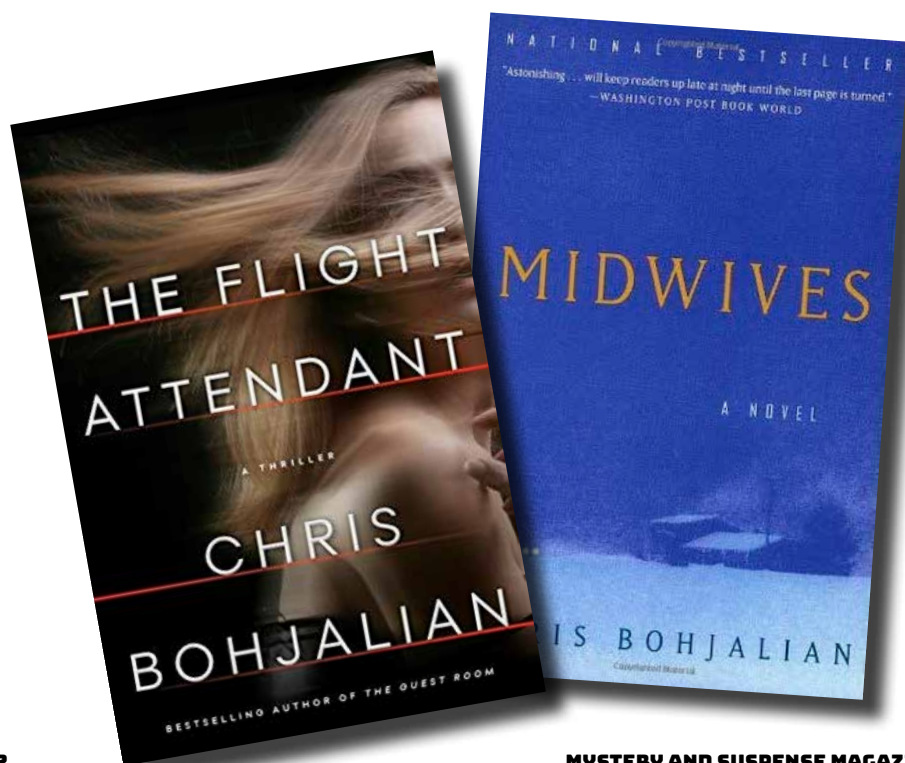
Among my favorite writers who have gone to that great library in the sky? Here are a few off the top of my head: Emily Dickinson. Joseph Heller. Toni Morrison. William Styron. Anita Shreve. Howard Frank Mosher. Patricia Highsmith. Ernest Gaines. Scott Fitzgerald.

Q. What are you working on now?

Chris: I wrote my next novel, *The Lions of Hollywood*, during the pandemic. It arrives in October 2022.

And I didn’t know what the “present” would look like in 2022, and so my next book is also historical fiction—BUT it is set in 1964 (a year I honestly don’t recall, but I was alive).

I loved Quentin Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* and decided I wanted to write a Hollywood novel, but with a twist. The world’s biggest movie star finally gets married and brings her entourage with her on her honeymoon safari—where it all goes to hell really fast, and it’s quite clear early on that an awful lot of Hollywood royalty is going to get eaten or otherwise killed.



FEATURE

YA Apocalyptic Thrillers WHY WE'RE HOOKED

BY KENDRA GRIFFIN

A group of road-weary, adrenaline-filled teens carry only backpacks and essentials. No parents to go home to, ever. No authority figures to provide them answers, and no idea how much of the modern world still exists outside the boundaries of whatever narrow strip of survival they’ve landed on.

Wherever these teens make their stand—an island, a cruise ship, an arena, a mountain outpost, or perhaps an abandoned stadium or network of subway tunnels—it’s sure to be a world in which our heroes can’t spare a thought for tomorrow. Every moment of today is about immediate survival.

Now take away the word “apocalypse” and switch out the MREs for Hot Pockets, and we’ve constructed the ultimate teenage fantasy. No parents to please, no corporate future to work toward, no SATs, no curfew, and best yet, vast stretches of unfettered time with companions who actually understand what they’re going through.



Readers of all ages long to relive a better teenage experience, one that might have been improved by zombies chasing us instead of our insecurities. Let’s face it: if we could do it over, most of us would chuck the rules and expectations and take more control. In YA thrillers, teen protagonists are not only saving themselves from a dangerous world, they’re changing that world in the ways we’d always hoped to. And what’s more, they’re doing it on their own terms.

So why are we so hooked by YA thrillers? (Or perhaps impaled, imprisoned, consumed, and conscripted?)

**YOUNG ADULT THRILLERS
ARE UNFLINCHINGLY
SUSPENSEFUL**

Just like in real life, teens are forced to navigate unfamiliar terrain at breakneck speed, and YA thrillers absorb this unrelenting pacing. Hyperbole is the norm, dialogue is clippy and bright, and chapters end on cliffhangers that leave readers scrabbling for handholds. I’ll never forget the weekend I picked up the Razorland series. Come Monday I was so behind at grading that I had to invent a stomach flu as an excuse for my students. Likewise, when my colleague got hooked, she spent three heart-thumping, sleepless nights only to be woken at dawn by her toddlers demanding pancakes. “I can’t stop reading,” she nearly sobbed to me halfway through *Horde*. “I might need to hire a babysitter!”

For teens, every day feels like the end of the world, so YA is a headlong rush from crisis to crisis, from one sinking ice floe to the next. Soon we’re reading too quickly and running too quickly to care about anything outside of the page. Likewise, YA thrillers propel readers forward without our adult brains slowing to question the likelihood of a plot point. Yes, YA is often criticized for being commercial, and it’s true some teen novels contain significant plot loopholes. It was admittedly

unclear to me how the *Enclave* survivors, who formed a post-apocalyptic society in pitch-black abandoned NYC subway tunnels, gathered any vegetation or greenery by which to avoid scurvy. Luckily, I was too busy tearing through the pages to see if fifteen-year-old Deuce would survive topside to care about the properties of fungi.

**TEENS RESIST AUTHORITY,
AND IT’S THRILLING**

The struggles teens face during the end times echo the struggles we face in an adult world—how can we stay true to ourselves when it feels like the structure of organized society is gnashing us between its teeth? Teens are already struggling to claim their identities, and this instinct for survival is paralleled by pandemics and ice tornadoes and vampire armies. In *Edge of Collapse*, a single glaring lightbulb bears down on Hannah for years until she wakes up, enlightened by the darkness, freed from a cruel sociopath’s imprisonment by an EMP that unlocks her remote prison cell. That accusatory lightbulb is a metaphor for the inquisition we face when our own bathroom-mirror lights glare at us before another day of adulthood.

So we read YA thrillers and watch Katniss from *The Hunger Games* unseat the gods with a single arrow and slay the monsters in the maze with only her wits. We watch Thomas in *The Maze Runner* race to escape his post-apocalyptic prison while dodging the Grievers. We watch Tris in *Divergent* defy categorization and claim her own identity. And we watch Jane McKeene in Justina Ireland’s *Dread Nation* refuse to accept society’s subjugating role for her as an “attendant” to wealthy white people. Unsurprisingly, in the process, Jane ends up having more to fear from humans than the undead, and we watch her fight for her rights as well as her life.

TEENS ARE STILL HOPEFUL

This might be the biggest reason adults love teen novels in general, and here I’ll make my riskiest claim; we all crave apocalyptic stories that aren’t entirely morose. This is because we’re as interested in seeing how characters navigate their new world as we are in watching them save it, and so we need at least some of them to live. Teenagers are not only resilient, they’re still refreshingly idealistic. They believe the world can be a good place even when faced with impossible odds. That idealism is contagious. It leaves room for unbelievable acts of heroism and courage.

Even more cheerful is that teens know what matters, especially in the face of despair: Love. Friendship. Courage. Good food, a warm, dry place to sleep at night, and above all else—loyalty. Of course, living in a world that doesn’t try to force us into intergalactic indentured servitude also matters. But so does knowing when to split your last Hot Pocket with friends. In *The Rule of Three*, after a computer virus plunges the world into chaos, Adam learns that only banding together with unlikely friends and neighbors can allow anyone to survive or rebuild. Teenagers are often miscategorized as selfish and self-absorbed, but the heart of a teenager is tender. There’s a sweetness to YA thrillers that’s hard to replicate in adult stories. Now add in monsters, a ticking clock, and some life-or-death stakes to protect our newfound clan from, and readers find themselves swept into an adventure that reminds them why survival even matters.

**AT THE END OF THE WORLD, WE
ARE ALL EQUAL**

A zombie infestation is the great equalizer. No one cares if you have acne during an apocalypse, or if you’re freckled, or left-handed, or a wee bit short. Katniss doesn’t fixate on being taller than Peeta. What matters is that he keeps Katniss from sacrificing her humanity. It’s not important who you were before the world began ending—all that matters is what you’ll do in what’s left of it. It makes no difference if you’re independently wealthy, working class, bookish, bossy, a middle child, annoyingly good looking, or maybe a slight bit pudgy. (Plus, starvation, right? In the end times, we’re probably all pretty buff.)

**The struggles teens face during the
end times echo the struggles we face
in an adult world—how can we stay
true to ourselves when it feels like
the structure of organized society is
gnashing us between its teeth?**

Millimeters from the snapping jaws of the undead, our demographics are finally invisible. All that matters now is that you’re suddenly—though perhaps inexplicably—good enough at something essential to be needed by your tribe of survivors. We love watching a brilliant but goofy nerd like Eugene in *The Walking Dead* outwit warrior-types so they keep him alive. Politics and social class become refreshingly irrelevant. But the ability to fashion a slingshot from windshield wiper blades? Essential.

Perhaps more importantly, science fiction as a genre has long paved the way for more diverse ensemble casts inhabiting worlds in which characters don’t have time for discrimination because they’re too busy fighting the monsters outside to humor the monsters within. It’s a relief to read about people of all races and backgrounds working together to save the world, and these themes mirror teens’ own longing for an end to the cliques and social standings that dominate their waking lives. The YA thriller genre also offers a place to an apocalyptic novel like *Dread Nation*, which draws from historical social injustice to create a riveting story that is as resonant as it is suspenseful.

We adults like a serving of nostalgia with our terror, and we’ll keep reading YA. YA thrillers offer readers a welcome escape from bureaucracy, normalcy, clogged gutters, leaky gut syndrome, taxes, and all the other archenemies that adulthood brings. And despite the nuclear fallout snow and the flesh-eating zombies and the lack of foamy lattes, a good teen apocalypse story offers a reality that is in some ways as simple and charming as it is terrifying.



About the author

Kendra Griffin can’t resist writing about a good dog or a good underdog, and she loves when her characters scream orders at her from the page. She is the author of the dystopian-thriller YA Pox series, which includes *Apocalypse Thoughts* and *The Pox Ward*. Kendra teaches creative writing and composition at Aims Community College in Colorado and frequently offers workshops on craft through local libraries. Visit her at kendragriffin.com.



Photo credit: Jay Nolan

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Lisa Unger

Lisa Unger is a *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author. With books published in twenty-six languages and millions of copies sold worldwide, she is widely regarded as a master of suspense. Her latest release is *Confessions on the 7:45*.

Q. *House of Crows* is your latest short story collection, bringing together a criminal psychiatrist, a paranormal investigator, and a struggling spiritual counselor at a 200-year-old property in upstate New York. How deep into the Gothic does it get? And what inspired you to write it?

Lisa: It does sound like a pretty Gothic setup, doesn't it? But I'm not sure it's ever big concepts like that that inspire me, even though I love an epic, dark story with lots of mysterious players and a creepy, atmospheric setting. It's always character voice that draws me in.

For *House of Crows*, I was loosely inspired by *The Haunting of Hill House*—not the story as much as the idea of a haunting as a personal event, and the ambiguity between reality and the constructions of our perceptions. I've read Shirley Jackson's iconic story more than once over my lifetime. And one of the elements that comes back to me again and again is how everyone brings his or her own dysfunction to Hill House.

I'm fascinated by the idea of haunted places—structures and the land upon which they're built—and who might be sensitive to those trapped energies, who might be vulnerable. This is a topic that has come up in my work quite a bit. And for *House of Crows*, I was wondering about how different types of people—fiction writers, psychiatrists, spiritualists, ghost hunters approach the idea of the haunting. Is it something internal, external, something made up altogether? Once this idea was turning around in my head, it wasn't long before I was hearing the voices of Claire, Matthew, Ian, and Mason, each of them with their own set of problems, and joined by a common dark experience that shaped all of their lives. It was their stories and how they connected that compelled me. But, yeah, pretty deep into Gothic territory!

Q. You've said elsewhere that you're fascinated by the small moments in people's lives. The chance encounters, the missed trains. Are there any small moments in *House of Crows*?

Lisa: All of our lives are most powerfully influenced by the small moments. We tend to think it's the big things, where we go to school, the work we choose, who we marry that determine the course of our lives. And those things have their impact. But the tiny decisions, the slip ups, this turn or that can have huge consequences.

In *House of Crows*, I think I dove a little deeper into another idea that I have explored before. How a moment in childhood or a buried trauma can inform our choices in ways that we're not even aware. When we meet Claire, Ian, Matthew, and

Mason, they're all adults with a shared unexplained event in their past. And each of them has constructed a life out of looking for answers. Claire explores human psychology. Ian is a ghost hunter. Mason has been searching for a spiritual truth that speaks to him. And Matthew is a professor of literature and a struggling writer. They all made choices, mistakes, big ones and small ones. But the sum of those choices leads them all back to where they began.

Q. Your recent *Confessions On The 7:45* was a reader favorite and Goodreads Choice Awards Nominee. Where do you see your latest achievements on the path of your writing career? What do you think this success would mean to the 29-year-old you who quit her job, sold her NYC home, and followed her dream?

Lisa: I don't spend a lot of time tallying up achievements or measuring career successes and shortfalls. But it's a good thing to stay connected to that 29-year-old writer, her passions, her dreams, her aspirations. They haven't changed much. I'm still trying to be a better writer every day. I'm still swept away by the stories and characters in my head. No matter what we achieve as writers, the day-to-day never stops being about the page.

I never looked ahead when I took that leap at 29; and I had no reason to believe that I would succeed, except that I had never wanted to do anything else. There was a part of me that always knew, even when the goal seemed very distant, that one day I would be a published writer. Mainly what I feel is gratitude. I'm so very grateful that I get to do what I love every

single day. It's a huge blessing that I never take for granted.

Q. Famously, you're an avid fan of both page and screen. What TV shows and books have you been bingeing?

Lisa: We're watching *The Affair* written by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi, starring Dominic West and Ruth Wilson, which originally aired on Showtime and we're now watching on Amazon Prime. It took me a while to get into it; now I'm a little obsessed. The characters aren't very likeable (which is not a dealbreaker as far as I'm concerned), but their layers and the twists of their relationships, as well as the multiple timelines, are mesmerizing.

After watching the Netflix original series *The Queen's Gambit*, I picked up the book by Walter Tevis. I loved the show, which is very true to the novel, but the psychological depth of Beth Harmon is best revealed on the page.

I'm currently reading *The Lost Family* by Libby Copeland, a non-fiction book about DNA testing. It's utterly riveting and a must read before you consider one of those at home "spit kits" as she calls them.

My current fiction read is *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell about an Ozarks girl looking for her errant father. It's beautiful, spare, and deep.

Q. What are you working on now?

Lisa: I am currently at work on the novel that will publish in 2022. And my next novel, *Last Girl Ghosted*—about a young writer following the dark digital trail of the dangerous man who ghosted her—will publish October 5, 2021.





The Villains of **ROMANTIC SUSPENSE**

**The bad boy. The criminal.
The anti-hero. When it comes to
the villains of romance, there's
something for everyone.**

BY LYNESSA LAYNE

Twiddling my thumbs one day at my grandmother's house, she noticed I didn't have a paperback in my hands for once.

"Look in the front bedroom," she said. "I have boxes of novels in there. Go find one that looks good."

Opening that door was like cracking the lid on a world of passion and machismo I'd never known to dream of! I read a lot more than one novel. High school Shakespeare had nothing on the scandalous covers I hid behind my English Lit book upon finishing assignments. God help me if Fabio had ever gotten taken up in class.

While the love scenes varied from genteel to graphically detailed, chock full of libidinous vocabulary, I found myself more intrigued with the villains and antagonists in the suspense novels who drove the characters or plots to their breaking points. I realized the villain is the real master of the story. In mysteries, we rifle through clues, twists, and red herrings in an attempt to identify our villain. But in many suspense novels (not all), the reader has the delicious privilege of knowing the villain while watching the charac-

ters discover the hard way—and hopefully before it's too late and all is lost forever! Forearm over forehead.

Now, to encounter these mind-bending, heart-rending scenarios all in one story. May I please have a double scoop of Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" topped with a cherry of Etta James's "At Last"?

The romantic suspense villain isn't typically your unseen maniac hiding in his secret lair, stroking a cat with his robotic arm while promising to get Gadget next time. This villain has a prismatic spotlight as bright as the protagonist and often controls the drama. Perhaps I shouldn't only reference villains, but antagonists. After all, a villain intends on harming our protagonist, while an antagonist just gets in the dang way and works opposite of the hero or heroine's goals by any means necessary. The perilous situations these characters are thrust into smudge the lines between these stereotypes and their roles in their stories.

Over the years of savoring sexy suspense, I can now introduce you to a few of my favorite romantic suspense personality types ... and the seedier sides of the genre that make you stay up all night reading.

THE BAD BOY

Ah, the guy your mother warned you about. Her intuition may not always be right, but she’s never been wrong. Don’t we love to hate her words, or better still desire to see her opinion go up in smoke so we can say, “I told you so”?

In the world of romantic suspense, this character often stars as a leather-studded biker or rebellious rule-breaker smoking in the corner seat at the bar, sending thrills and chills down our spines. He might be a street-savvy stranger with that sexy something, a mercenary, a hit man, or even your misunderstood misfit. These are the men who beckon the good girls (and vice versa) to take a walk on the wild side or accept a ride from a gorgeous grifter.

But like mom cautioned, don’t try this at home. Stick with fiction.

THE CRIMINAL

Often selfish and motivated by money and power, this is where you find your syndicate masterminds, their henchmen, thieves, and outlaws on the run. They don’t care to hide who they are, and they invite you to question their authority or threaten to take them down. They have connections in the sordid underworld *and* in those you think you can trust. Our protagonists love to become entangled in the various webs of impossibility while distracted by sophisticated charm or macho manipulation.

THE DISTURBED DEVIANT

Romantic suspense can feature polished personas battling psychological scars. Often this emotional damage takes the place of the villain. Authors like Sylvia Day, E. L. James, Megan Hart, and countless others tackle this tough terrain. Millions of readers devour these journeys through dark mental labyrinths along with the protagonists, who help the victimized navigate trials toward recovery.



THE CIVIL SERVANT

This is the cop, firefighter, soldier, or politician who may be dirty in every sense of the meaning. Whether through payoffs, contaminating evidence, getting in the protagonist’s way, or getting too cozy with them, they’re corrupted (and fun to be corrupted by) while maintaining a wholesome facade for the public eye.

Be careful, though. There might be a wild side hiding in the closet, and this romantic villain can pull our hero or heroine off his or her mission.

THE DELILAH

Leading ladies aren’t just about destroying the protagonist with their sensuality and seduction. While rocking their sugar and spice, a dangerous female ranges from a revolutionary in homemaker disguise to the weapon-wielding black widow determined to disarm our hero/heroine. These women complicate the hero’s goals while said hero plans to tame her wiles, but a great power play is always in store.

BEAUTIES of BEASTS

In general novels, these would be animals, a la the Saint Bernard in Stephen King’s *Cujo*. But because romance suspense is a love connection involving life-threatening danger, the genre packs a sub-genre of highly-attractive paranormal or supernatural beings. Think vampires, shifters, Valkyrie, and fallen angels who cause or face death-defying struggles between mortals and those who eat mortals.

Some of these creatures combat impossible cravings by tasting the skin rather than devouring the flesh they so long for. They also create chaos within their own supernatural realms by falling for enemy creatures. J.R. Ward, Charlaine Harris, Kresley Cole, Dannika Dark, and countless others tell of beasts and beings dying to kill or kiss our hero/heroine. As to which desire wins, only the reader will find out.

THE ANTI-HERO/ANTI-VILLAIN

Perhaps defined as a main character who does not have the usual qualities expected in a hero, the anti-hero can also be a notable character lacking heroic traits. An anti-villain attempts to lighten or disguise their evil intentions by pretending to be virtuous. In other words, a total sociopath. Both wild cards love to keep us guessing till the very end.



THE BULLY

This controversial, dark, and broody character uses mental, physical, or emotional opposition to make the hero/heroine’s life miserable. This type is similar to an enemies-to-lovers dynamic. This type of villain is not for everyone, as the subject matter can rankle a reader’s senses if said character goes too far or the hero doesn’t stand up for themselves. Authors such as Penelope Douglas, L.J. Shen, and Callie Rose traverse this tightrope.

THE CATALYST

In a great romantic suspense, sometimes the villain is the plot itself rather than an actual person. The weather, for instance, can be the catalyst for pulling characters who’d otherwise never be together into a predicament. The personalities in chaos bond and become allies. Adrenaline heightens the normal emotional responses and leads our protagonists toward explosive chemistry.

There is a very thin, blurry line between love, hate, villains, antagonists, and protagonists. Just as a villain isn’t always an antagonist, an antagonist isn’t always villainous. Where mystery and suspense thrillers may include an element of romance, romantic suspense promises to drive danger into a love story and wreck contemporary norms. Any of the aforementioned villains or antagonists could very well find redemption and become your plot-twisting protagonist with a change of heart. Or maybe you’ll find yourself so sympathetic to their plight, you’ll wonder if deep down you’re a villain too ... muahahaha!



About the author

Lynessa Layne is the author of the romantic suspense series *Don’t Close Your Eyes* and several short stories, including work featured in *Writer’s Digest*. She is a military spouse and home schools four of their five children. From small town Texas girl to rolling stone, she and her blended family currently gather moss in the heart of sweet home Alabama.

For more information on Lynessa’s work visit lynessalayne.com or find her on Facebook, Twitter, or Goodreads.



Photo credit: Jeff Wojtaszek

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Lisa Scottoline

Lisa Scottoline is the *New York Times* bestselling and Edgar Award-winning author of 33 novels, including *Eternal*, her first-ever historical novel. She also writes a weekly column with her daughter Francesca Serritella for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* titled “Chick Wit,” a witty take on life from a woman’s perspective.

Q. *Eternal* is your latest historical suspense blockbuster. For readers who haven’t had a chance to grab it yet, what’s it about?

Lisa: I’m super excited about *Eternal*. Its inspiration goes back some 40 years, believe it or not, which makes me sound both really old and also like I procrastinate, LOL. But way back when I was in college, I was lucky enough to take a seminar with the late, great Philip Roth, and it was amazing. There were only 15 students in the class, and he introduced me to the work of Primo Levi, an Italian-Jewish chemist who opposed Italian fascism leading up to World War II, was captured by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, but lived to write an amazing memoir, *If This Is a Man*.

From then on, I was fascinated by the Italian fascist period, the effects it had on everyday people, why so many bought in and so many didn’t, and this fantastic interplay between law, justice, and family. Like, what happens when the laws not only permit discrimination, but mandate it? It really turns a concept of justice on its head, and I felt that was fascinating, but I really wanted to examine it not at the abstract academic level but on a personal level, at the family level, and how that view of justice, or sanctioned injustice, affects the lives of everyday people. While I was doing the research for the novel, I learned about an event that took place in Rome in 1943 that was really shocking but not well known outside the historical scholarship, and I said, that is a story that deserves to be told. And all of that is in *Eternal*.

Q. You’ve said secondhand experiences aren’t good enough when it comes to your research; that you want to experience what your characters will feel. How did you accomplish that for *Eternal*?

Lisa: I do like to experience almost everything my characters do, and obviously for historical fiction, that has some limitations, but actually fewer than you think.

For example, a critical set piece in *Eternal* took place in October 1943, so I went to Rome exactly the same time of year and did my research there. It really opened my eyes and in many ways gave me lots of realistic details for the novel that I wouldn’t have otherwise. I wanted to learn what flowers bloomed then, what the light looks like, and all of those granular facts, and at the same time, I was there during the 75th anniversary of the historical event I was writing about, so I was able to talk to people, attend events, and get invitations to private memorials that I wouldn’t have otherwise.

But the central message of the novel is truly eternal, I hope, because ultimately what you’re doing is plumbing human emotions to create a compelling narrative, and that’s something that I’ve always done in novels before. Anybody who likes anything I’ve written will love *Eternal* and will recognize it as a natural progression in many ways, though the themes I’m dealing with in it are writ larger than ever before.

Q. You and your daughter, Francesca Serritella, have reportedly been quarantining together through the pandemic. How is having another writer in the house affecting what you’re writing and reading?

Lisa: I love quarantining with my wonderful daughter, who just published her debut novel last year, entitled *Ghosts of Harvard*, which is terrific. She lives in New York City, but we are both home now quarantining and working on first drafts of our next novels, so there’s no one better to hang with. We keep ourselves laughing, baking cookies, and working, and she even keeps the home fires burning, because she finds that making a fire in the fireplace is her Zen approach to thinking about her novel, and I just love having a fire.

I know we both feel very lucky to have jobs we love and to be able to do them at home, because if this pandemic doesn’t give you perspective, then nothing will. I have always counted my blessings and I feel so grateful to so many front-line workers who have been doing so much for a year now, to help keep us all healthy, safe, and alive. With their help, we will all get through this together, and with vaccinations on the horizon, I feel more hopeful than I have before.

Q. Speaking of reading, have you read anything good lately?

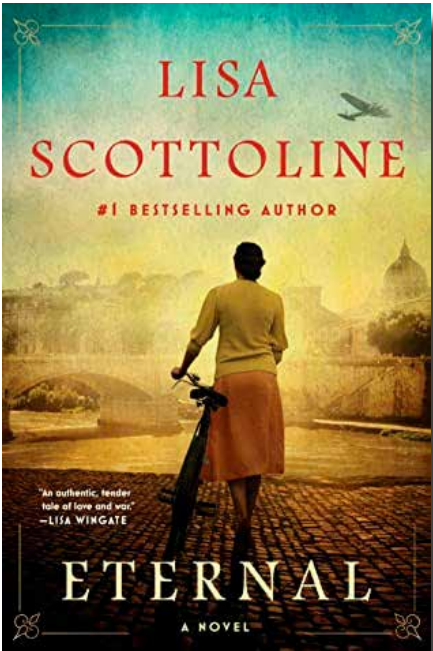
Lisa: I do find that I’m reading more during the pandemic, but I’ve always loved reading. Obviously, I’m online as much as anybody else, and I waste hours doom-scrolling and watching videos of otters swimming and baby elephants trying to stand up. But reading is the thing that centers me,

calms me down, and focuses me. I wish we thought of reading as more like self-care. We can convince people to get on an exercise bicycle for 20 minutes, but we can’t convince them to read for 20 minutes, and I think that reading is equally beneficial if not more so.

I’m not reading any differently than I ever did before, because you can lose yourself in any well-written book, and I’m loving so many authors these days. I’m on a historical fiction tear because of *Eternal*, and I’m loving Chris Bohjalian, Elsa Morante, Elena Ferrante, Mark Sullivan, Lisa Wingate, Lisa See, Paula McLain, Kristin Hannah, Martha Hall Kelly, Karen Robards, Christina Baker Klein, Adriana Trigiani, Pam Jenoff, Fiona Davis, and Delia Owens. Also, I’m a huge fan of David Baldacci, who though he is thought of as a thriller writer, has written a really terrific historical fiction. For mysteries and thrillers, some of my regular go-to authors are Harlan Coben, Sandra Brown, Janet Evanovich, Lisa Gardner, Mary Kay Andrews, and there’s so many others, so please forgive if I forgotten some.

Q. What are you working on now?

Lisa: I am working on my next domestic thriller, and in the future, I hope to be able to write historical fiction, domestic thrillers, and the Rosato & DiNunzio series! And I still have a Sunday humor column for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, which anybody can read on my Facebook page every Sunday morning. I know how lucky I am to be able to write for a living, and I’m going to keep on keeping on!



Elisabetta, Marco, and Sandro grow up as the best of friends despite their differences. Elisabetta is a feisty beauty who dreams of becoming a novelist; Marco the brash and athletic son in a family of professional cyclists; and Sandro a Jewish mathematics prodigy, kind-hearted and thoughtful, the son of a lawyer and a doctor. Their friendship blossoms to love, with both Sandro and Marco hoping to win Elisabetta’s heart. But in the autumn of 1937, all of that begins to change as Mussolini asserts his power, aligning Italy’s Fascists with Hitler’s Nazis and altering the very laws that govern Rome. In time, everything that the three hold dear—their families, their homes, and their connection to one another—is tested in ways they never could have imagined.

As anti-Semitism takes legal root and World War II erupts, the threesome realizes that Mussolini was only the beginning. The Nazis invade Rome, and with their occupation come new atrocities against the city’s Jews, culminating in a final, horrific betrayal. Against this backdrop, the intertwined fates of Elisabetta, Marco, Sandro, and their families will be decided, in a heartbreaking story of both the best and the worst that the world has to offer.



TAPPING INTO CONSPIRACY

A debriefing of some of the most popular conspiracy thrillers of the last century

BY BOYD TAYLOR

There has long been a nexus between conspiracy fiction and current events. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) was set in London at a time when stories of anarchists and foreign spies were widely circulated. His tale of an attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory had its birth in a rumored plot by actual anarchists, one of whom was killed by detonated explosives. Conrad's conspiracy within a conspiracy—in which the anarchist leader is also an agent provocateur of a foreign government—rang true to readers who heard about terrorists and the Russian threat to Britain's Indian possessions on a daily basis.

Similarly, the adventure novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) by John Buchan was written at a time when German spies were on the Londoner's mind. It is cited as one of the earliest conspiracy novels. It was certainly one of the most popular, read by British soldiers in the trenches of World War I.

After the Great War, United States Senator Gerald Nye headed a Senate investigation into the munitions industry, which he concluded had conspired to drag the United States into World War I for its own profit. Nye labeled munitions manufacturers "merchants of death." His committee's report fed the isolationist moods of Americans in the mid-1930s. The British government conducted a similar investigation with a less dramatic but just as convincing report.

Eric Ambler used this as a plot device in his first novel, *The Dark Frontier* (1936). Ambler describes the attempt of a British munitions company to obtain the specifications for a newly developed atomic bomb in order to sell the manufacturing secrets to the highest bidders. Ambler was one of the first novelists to predict the invention of nuclear weapons; although he got many of the details wrong, he was right in predicting a race by the great powers to own the technology and to use espionage to get it.



A NEW ERA OF POLITICAL PLOTTING

As the world transitioned into the 1960s, current events provided a great amount of fodder for conspiracy plotlines. Writers took their lead from front-page news. For example, in America, fears were widespread that the Chinese were brainwashing American prisoners of war. Certainly, many prisoners were subjected to enhanced indoctrination sessions and there were well-publicized defections. In Richard Condon's novel *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), the son of a prominent U.S. political family is brainwashed into being an assassin for a Communist conspiracy.

For most Americans, the most traumatic event of the 1960s was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Conspiracy theories began the day he was shot and still continue. Richard Condon's *Winter Kills* (1979), not a typical thriller, is a dark satirical novel clearly based on the assassination and conspiracy theories surrounding the event. Even books that came decades later, like *American Tabloid* (1995) by James Elroy, continue to explore the assassination. In Elroy's novel, the FBI, the CIA, and the Mafia all come to have been involved in the Kennedy assassination.

The Cold War was a time of spies, double agents, and defections. In 1951, British diplomats Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess disappeared. The suspicion was that they had defected to the Soviet Union. That was correct and became public knowledge in 1956 when they appeared at a Moscow press conference. They were two members of what became known as the Cambridge Five, a ring of spies in the United Kingdom that passed information to the Soviet Union during World War II and into the 1950s.

Many conspiracy novels drew inspiration from the outcry about Soviet spying and double agents. The ones that resonated most with the reading public, and which were marked with his particularly engaging style and outstanding plots, were John Le Carre's *George Smiley* series, starting with *Call for the Dead* (1961) and ending with *A Legacy of Spies* (2017).

Watergate and Nixon's downfall shone a light on trusted American institutions. The nation watched spellbound as the military, the CIA, the FBI, and the presidency itself came under that harsh spotlight—and none of them were above public suspicion. In that climate, conspiracy fiction writers had many jumping-off points for their novels.

In James Grady's *Six Days of the Condor* (1974), a CIA analyst may have stumbled across information plotters did want him to know. While he is away from his desk, his colleagues are killed in a mass assassination. The novel is the story of his attempts to escape from danger and learn the truth. When he tries to get help, he learns that no one, including his CIA superiors, can be trusted.

MODERN CONSPIRACY

Conspiracy theories based on rogue government agencies continued into the 1980s and beyond. An example is *The Bourne Identity*, (1980) by Robert Ludlum, in which amnesiac Jason Bourne struggles to determine his true identity while escaping an assassin and the CIA. The book was the first of a trilogy, which also includes *The Bourne Supremacy* (1986) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (1990).

There was an attempt on Charles De Gaulle's life by military officers who believed DeGaulle was a traitor for granting independence to Algeria, ending the bloody war that had dragged on for eight years. Memories of the war lingered in French consciousness for decades. *The Day of the Jackal* (1971) by English author Frederick Forsyth begins with the actual attempted assassination of De Gaulle and builds from there. One of the best conspiracy novels, a large part of its appeal is its close connection with the events in France in the 1960s.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

Of course there has been a good deal of conspiracy fiction in the last twenty years. Much of it, however, does not deal with events of the day and the plotters are not necessarily familiar to the reader. A good example is Dan Brown's Robert Langdon series, most famously, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and most recently, *Origin* (2017). Secret societies and scientific breakthroughs, told against newly harnessed technology, make these books exciting and suspenseful.

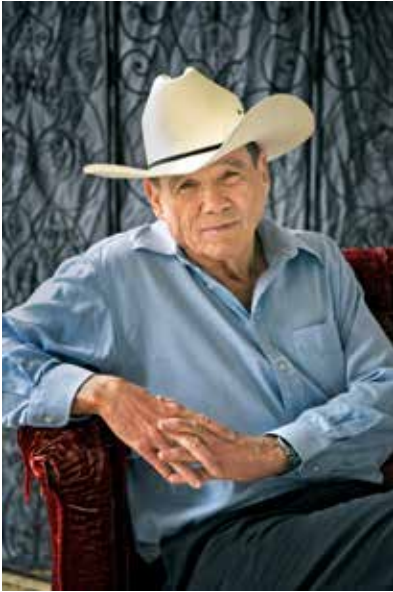
However good such suspense novels may be, it's the reality of the 21st Century that is the low-hanging fruit for conspiracy novelists. The last twenty years have been as tumultuous and unsettling as the 1960s. Maybe more so. The Bush-Gore election and hanging chads; the Supreme Court deciding that election; the financial meltdown; 9/11; the War on Terror; the Clintons and the wife of an ex-president running for the office; Russian and Chinese interference in our elections; the new space race; the vulnerability of our infrastructure to cyber-attack; the global pandemic; "fake news"; the impact of the new social media; the 2020 Presidential election; the January 2021 attack on the Capitol.

These events have created new realities, ones that are, in truth, stranger to us than fiction. Now writers of conspiracy fiction will be using those previously unimaginable events as the springboard for fiction that is stranger than the new reality. A new heyday of conspiracy fiction is coming.

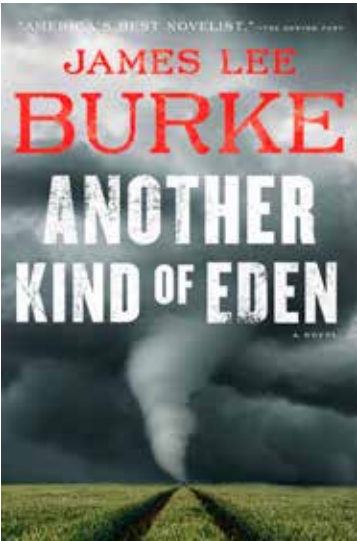


About the author

Boyd Taylor is a political suspense novelist. *The Pronghorn Conspiracy*, the latest novel in his five-book series, embroils Donnie Ray Cuinn in a terrorist plot to kidnap the president and steal nuclear weapons. In a former life, Boyd was a lawyer and a corporate manager with a Boston company. His work took him to locations in North America, Europe, South America, and Asia. Boyd crafts his novels in Austin, Texas. Learn more about Boyd's work at boydtaylorauthor.com.



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James Lee Burke

James Lee Burke is a *New York Times* bestselling author, two-time winner of the Edgar Award, Mystery Writers of America Grand Master, and recipient of Guggenheim Fellowship. He’s the author of thirty-eight novels and two short story collections.

Q. Another Kind of Eden is the latest in your Holland family saga, following the Holland family in Texas. How does this standalone novel impact the whole?

James: The narrator is Aaron Holland Broussard, the narrator of *The Jealous Kind*, one of the three best novels I have written. As you say it is a standalone book, but it continues the story of the Holland family and the history of the American Plains. The story takes place just before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous week the planet has ever experienced. It is also a doorway into the cultural changes during the 1960s, a struggle that for good or bad we still find ourselves hopelessly inside.

I have never published a book like this one. It goes deep into the supernatural. It also deals with the advent of the drug culture, the unionization of the farm workers in Colorado, and the Ludlow Massacre. The romantic story of Aaron and the Texas waitress Jo Anne McDuffy is one of the best I have written.

Q. A theme that runs through many of your works is the menace, even evil, that lurks beneath the surface of people and places. What do your works have to tell us about the present?

James: Yes, I have written about the war between good and evil since I wrote my first novel, *Half of Paradise*. The themes have never changed. Geographically the great epic in America lies in the West, not the East. As my old teacher John Neihardt told me, civilization follows the sun. Since the Louisiana Purchase two groups of people have tried to leave their imprint on the West: those who would preserve its mystical beauty and those who would turn it into a gravel pit. Ironically the Clanton gang would have left everything unchanged; the Earps made the West safe for corporations and arguably the theft of half the continent.

Q. The story goes that many of the characters from the Holland family come from real people on your mother’s side of the family, including Sam Holland, who killed nine men in gun duels before becoming a saddle preacher. How do you research them?

James: I have never done much research and have simply let the characters in the story walk onto the page. The American West was a state of mind or, better said, an outdoor mental asylum filled with the best dramatic characters since the actors on the stage of the Globe Theater. I sometimes ask myself this question: Would I rather walk around with an iPhone glued to the side of my head or go back in time and have dinner with the Rose of Cimarron and Sam Houston and Etta Place and Black Elk and Bill Hickock and Cochise and the Angel of Goliad?

Q. Your daughter, Alafair Burke, is a celebrated crime novelist in her own right. What amount of influence have you had on her, or she on you?

James: Since she was a little girl Alafair has always gone her own way. At age five she could read aloud from *Cool Hand Luke*. Her IQ is not measurable. She wrote her first short story in the first grade. It was titled “The Roller Rink Murder Mystery.” She graduated at the top of her class at Stanford Law. My wife and I are extremely proud of her, as we are of our other children.

By the way, after I have said these things about Alafair to other people, there has been a pause, coupled with a blank look, invariably followed by, “Your wife must be so intelligent!”

Q. What are you working on now?

James: I have just completed a book set in Montana and also narrated by Aaron Holland Broussard. I have never seen a book like it. That may seem vain, but it’s the truth. It deals heavily with the supernatural and is a testimony to our daughter Pamala.

AGENT OF DUTY

Federal agents in political thrillers

BY ALEX DAVIDSON

Drama requires conflict. There’s the outer conflict: get the girl, disarm the bomb, gather all the infinity stones before Thanos does. Then there’s the kind of conflict that gives characters depth: inner conflict.

For “Fed” characters in political thrillers, one of the best ways this inner conflict expresses itself is through the contention of duty versus belief.

The term “Feds” encompasses many different groups: the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Secret Service, the Diplomatic Security Service, and more. However, these agencies are very similar in terms of how they function. They’re expected to be apolitical, but the directors of these organizations are all political appointees. They serve “at the pleasure of the president,” which causes one to wonder just how apolitical they can be. As an example, let us look at how the most famous (and sometimes infamous) of these federal agencies came into being.





A SHORT HISTORY OF FEDERAL AGENTS

In 1908, Teddy Roosevelt started the precursor agency of the FBI called the Bureau of Investigation. Initially, the BOI’s job was to break up corporate monopolies. It was when the BOI was tasked with finding German spies during World War I that it essentially became a law enforcement agency. This was also when the BOI began targeting so-called “hyphenated Americans,” particularly German-Americans and Italian-Americans, over concerns of espionage. They also illegally detained Americans who had not registered for military service under the Selective Service Act.

In the 1920s, President Harding’s interior secretary Albert Fall allowed oil companies to tap U.S. Navy emergency oil reserves in Teapot, Wyoming in exchange for financial kickbacks. After Senator Burton K. Wheeler launched an investigation into Fall’s misconduct, Attorney General Harry Daugherty enlisted then-FBI Director William J. Burns to end the Senate probe. When Director Burns could not find any dirt on Senator Wheeler, he concocted baseless corruption charges against the Senator. The gambit ultimately backfired, Director Burns was removed as the Bureau’s Director, and the FBI was placed under the leadership of a young agent named J. Edgar Hoover.

The rest, as they say, is history. Under Hoover’s nearly fifty-year reign, the FBI essentially became a tool of political power. Be it rooting out “radicals”—from war protestors to communists to civil rights leader—or compiling dossiers on people in government the Bureau thought might be security risks, under Hoover, the FBI continually found itself in service to a political party or a set of political beliefs.

So, what happens when a character’s beliefs conflict with those of the federal agency he or she serves?

You have an ingredient for a compelling story.

INNER CONFLICT: DUTY VERSUS BELIEF

In Vince Flynn’s *Term Limits*, unknown assassins murder several powerful and corrupt politicians. The assassins, who consider themselves patriots not unlike those who fought in the American Revolution, demand radical reform, a balanced budget, a national crime bill, an end to “pork-barrel politics,” among other things.

FBI Agent Skip McMahon and former-US-Marine-turned-freshman-congressman Michael O’Rourke work to identify and stop the mysterious assassins. While the novel’s action set pieces are thrilling, what is truly interesting about *Term Limits* is our protagonists’ inner conflict: they sympathize with the assassins. Rourke and McMahon are dutybound to stop the assassinations, but at the same time, they agree with the assassins’ political message. This moral dilemma between duty and belief makes the novel more than just a by-the-numbers political thriller. It forces the reader to examine their own beliefs about the greater good and whether ends justify means.

Don Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog* trilogy is an epic exploration of the drug trade that spans four decades. DEA Agent Arturo Keller is a dedicated DEA agent assigned to Mexico, whose politics cause problems with everyone from the cartels to his own government. He comes to view the war on drugs as unwinnable. By the final book in the series, Keller is the head of the DEA and must contend with his boss and main antagonist—a real estate mogul, reality television star turned President of the United States. Arturo’s inner conflict is not only compelling to watch; the strength he shows in sticking to his beliefs in the face of extreme political pressure is what makes him a hero.

But the pressure of duty versus belief does not always create heroes. James Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* spans 1958 to

1963 and follows two FBI agents: Kemper Boyd, a Southern playboy enamored with the wealth and glamor embodied by JFK, and Ward Littell, a Jesuit seminarian turned FBI agent with a deep moral hatred for organized crime, who is stuck monitoring Communist Party activities. Of the two characters, Littell is by far the more interesting. This is because unlike Boyd, Littell is morally and ideologically conflicted by the work he does for the FBI.

In the novel, J. Edgar Hoover has political axes to grind. He is soft on organized crime and even collaborates with them to achieve his political goals. He hates Fidel Castro and the Kennedys and will do anything to bring them down

Littell becomes increasingly disgruntled with the FBI and Hoover’s disinterest in going after organized crime, which Littell views as truly evil. He sees Hoover’s anti-communist crusade as a witch hunt and begins to harbor Leftist sympathies. So he investigates the mob on his own.

Ultimately, Hoover fires Littell for not toeing the line. Hoover also revokes Littell’s pension and labels him as a communist sympathizer, making it difficult for him to find legitimate work as a lawyer. In a final, ultimate insult, Littell’s hero, Robert Kennedy, refuses to hire Littell on his committee to prosecute the mob after receiving a report from Hoover falsely accusing Littell of having mob ties.

Disillusioned, destroyed, and with little recourse, Littell ultimately becomes a mob lawyer and, ironically, as such, wins his way back into Hoover’s good graces.

Watching the idealistic Littell struggle like a rubber ducky caught in a squall of political forces makes witnessing his transformation from hero to antihero all the more riveting.

SOCIOPOLITICAL THRILLERS

James Ellroy’s sequel, *The Cold Six Thousand*, begins immediately where *American Tabloid* left off. The plot of *The Cold Six Thousand* is long and byzantine in all of the best ways, but in short, the novel finds Ward Littell working for the FBI again, as well as for the mob. But he is also skimming mob profits and funneling them to Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement (his mea culpa for all of the bad things he has done as a mob lawyer). Among other things, the novel details the FBI’s meddling in the civil rights movement and culminates in the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in 1968.

Exploring sociopolitical aspects like race relations and equal rights is another interesting (and less common) way belief is pitted against duty in political thrillers. A great example of a sociopolitical thriller is Attica Locke’s *Bluebird, Bluebird*. In it, a black Texas Ranger named Darren Matthews

(not technically a Fed, I know) is asked by a friend in the FBI to investigate a pair of murders in a small, racially-divided East Texas town.

In *Bluebird, Bluebird*, Matthews grapples with the inner conflict of what it means to be a black man in Texas versus his duty as a Texas Ranger to the state he loves. Without giving too much away, there is a twist at the end of the novel, which reveals that Matthews essentially broke the law in the name of his beliefs. This revelation, rooted in his conflict of duty versus belief, makes Matthews all the more fascinating.

FEDERAL BAD GUYS

Duty versus belief creates characters that are heroic (Arturo Keller in Winslow’s *The Power of the Dog* trilogy), antiheroic (Ward Little in Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand*), and a combination of both (Darren Matthews in *Bluebird, Bluebird*).

Now let’s examine how Feds function as antagonists in political thrillers. In David Baldacci’s *Absolute Power*, veteran burglar Luther Whitney breaks into a billionaire’s house to rob it. Instead, he witnesses President of the United States Alan Richmond engaging in violent sexual intercourse with the billionaire’s wife, which ends with the Secret Service shooting and killing the woman. As Luther makes his escape, secret service agents spot him. Richmond learns that Luther not only witnessed the murder but also possesses a letter opener that places the President at the scene of the crime. The President utilizes the full power of the federal government to hunt for Luther.

As the head of the federal government, Richmond does not suffer from the same inner conflict of duty versus belief as some of the other characters we have discussed. In this way, he is somewhat one-dimensional. He is a character who shirks his duty in favor of a belief (in this case, self-preservation). But if nothing else, the novel exemplifies why Feds make formidable antagonists in political thrillers. The reason is right there in the title of Baldacci’s book. It is in their almost “absolute power.”

The inner conflict of duty versus belief is a tried-and-true way that authors create interesting Fed characters in political thrillers. This internal conflict makes the character’s outer conflict (win the war on drugs, bring down the mob, solve the murders) deeper and more profound. This inner conflict also links directly to the character’s development. Regardless of which way they go—hero, antihero, or villain—it is always fascinating to watch these character arcs under the pressures of political agency.



About the author

Alex Davidson is a multi-award-winning screenwriter, playwright, and indie author. He earned his MFA in Dramatic Writing from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. His debut thriller novel *Black Rifle* was released in February, 2021, to critical acclaim. The sequel to *Black Rifle* is due to be released in the summer of 2021.

Learn more about Alex and his work at Alex-Davidson.net. Get your copy of *Black Rifle* at viewbook.at/BlackRifle.

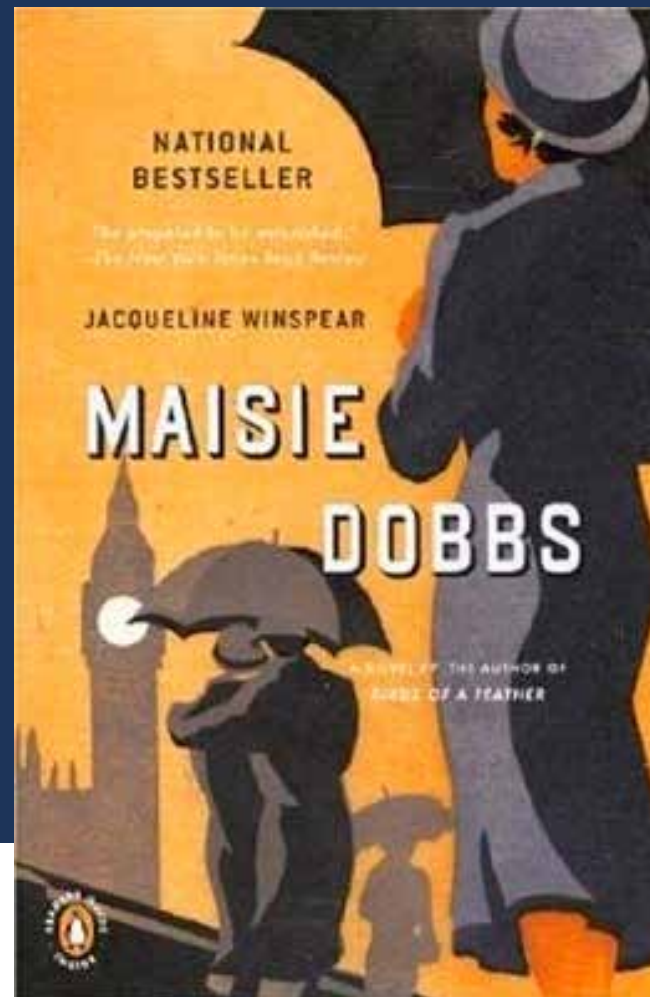


The Amateur Sleuth Heroine

Six strong, inquisitive female sleuths

BY HEIDI SLOWINSKI

The mystery and thriller genres have largely been dominated by male protagonists. But their female counterparts are no shrinking violets. For example, there is no more influential amateur sleuth than Nancy Drew. This iconic character has graced the pages of books dating back to the 1930s. She has continued to evolve over the decades, inspiring generations of readers. Independent, brave, and inquisitive: here are six more heroines to add to your reading list.

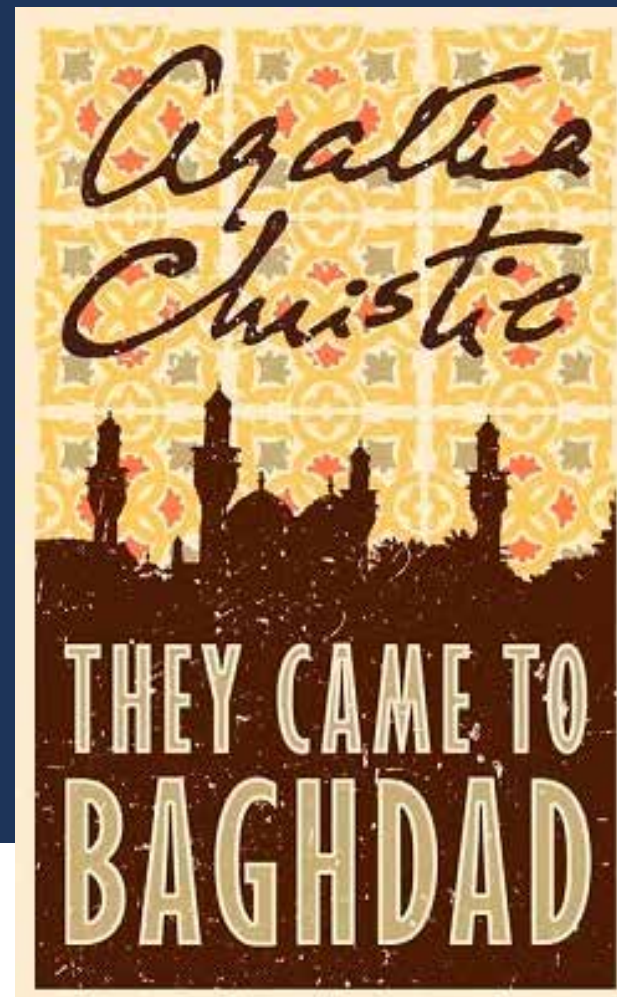


MAISIE DOBBS

Maisie Dobbs

Maisie Dobbs is the first in a literary series by Jacqueline Winspear. Maisie finds herself working as a housekeeper at the age of thirteen to help her widower father. But her life takes an unexpected turn when her employer catches her studying in the library. Maisie then finds herself the apprentice of a private investigator before eventually going on her own.

Set against the backdrop of the Great War, self-employed, independent women were a very modern phenomenon. It comes as no surprise then that Maisie's personality comes across as quirky and a bit eccentric. However, Winspear crafts a strong protagonist who is highly relatable.

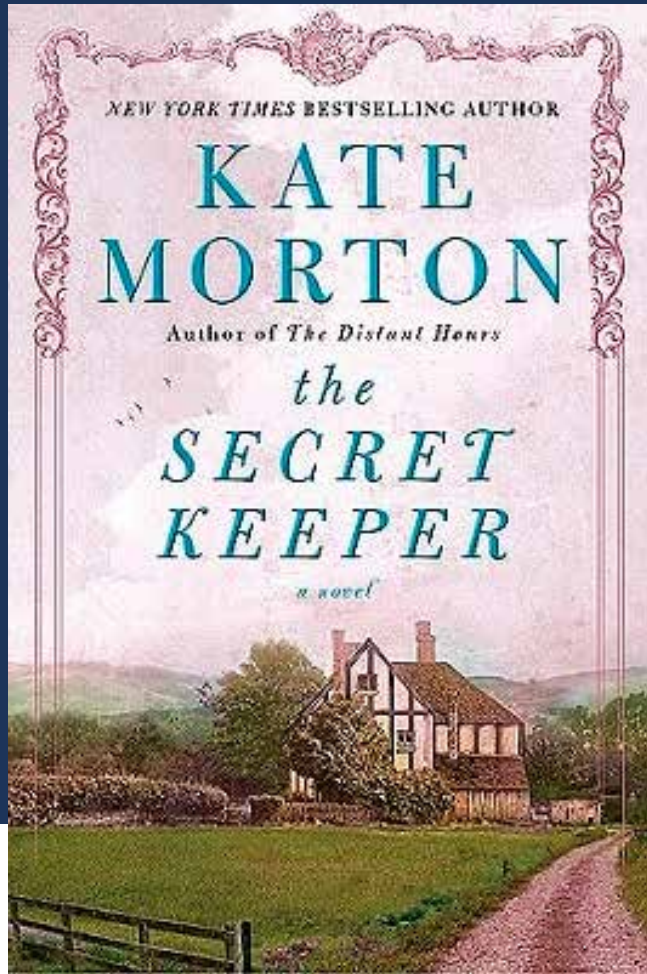


ANNA SCHEELE

They Came to Baghdad

They Came to Baghdad centers on Victoria Jones, a young woman in London, whose infatuation with a charming man named Edward sends her on an adventure to the Middle East. But the real hero of this story is another woman, Anna Scheele, the assistant to an American banking executive, who uncovers a great deal about the financial dealings of a shadowy group plotting a sabotage.

This story is an interesting change from Agatha Christie's typical mystery novel in that it is an action-based spy novel. Also of interest is the subtle use of tongue-and-cheek humor.

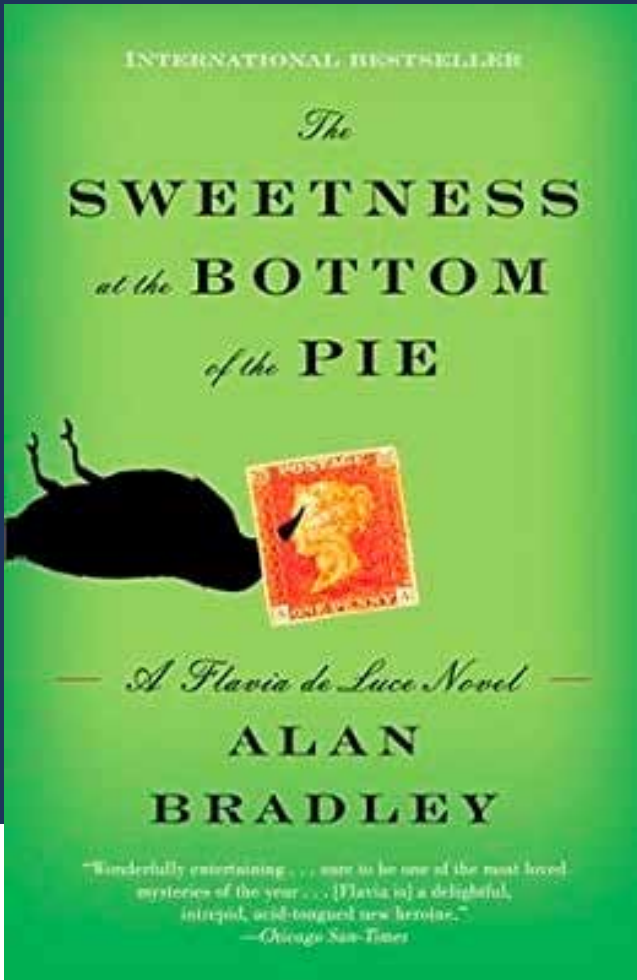


LAUREL NICOLSON

The Secret Keeper

Sixteen-year-old Laurel is hiding out in the treehouse at her family's country home in 1960s England. Her daydreams about a life in London and a sweetheart named Billy are quickly shattered when she witnesses a shocking crime. Five decades later, Laurel is an acclaimed actress living in London when something gets her questioning her memories from that summer day of her youth. A family gathering in celebration of her mother's ninetieth birthday could be her last chance to get answers to this mystery.

Laurel is a wonderfully complex amateur sleuth in a story woven across three time periods as she uncovers her mother's past in the war-torn London of the 1930s.

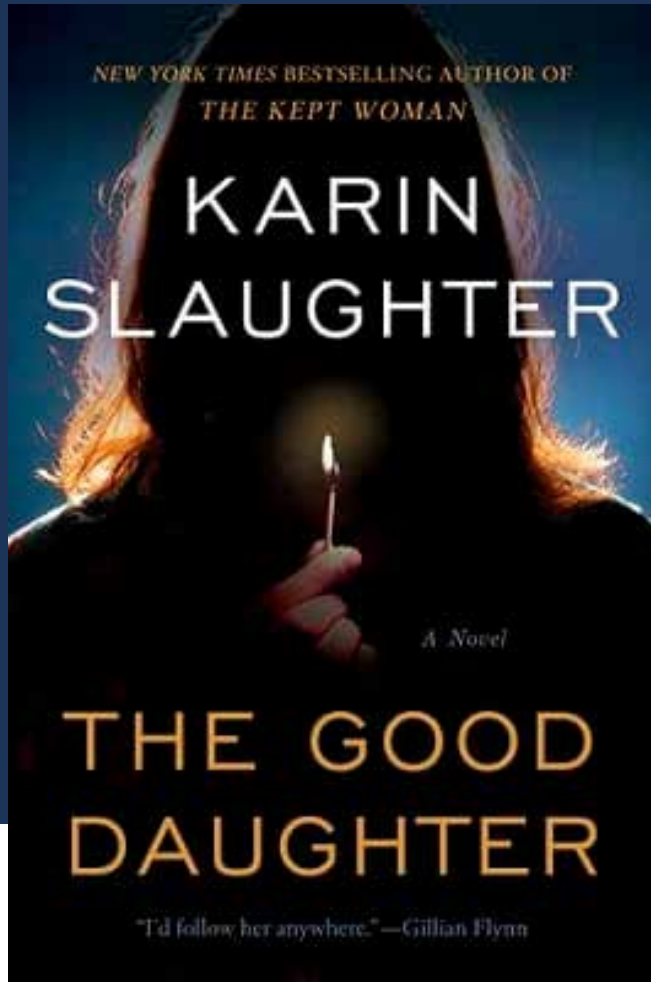


FLAVIA DE LUCE

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie features Flavia de Luce, an amateur sleuth living in the English countryside in 1950. At the age of eleven, Flavia is fascinated by chemistry, specifically the creation of poisons. Flavia has to pull herself away from her work in the attic of the family home when a bird turns up on the doorstep with a stamp on its beak. Flavia then discovers a man in the garden, breathing his last breath.

Flavia brilliantly captures a youthful zeal that inspires the reader to get in touch with their inner child.

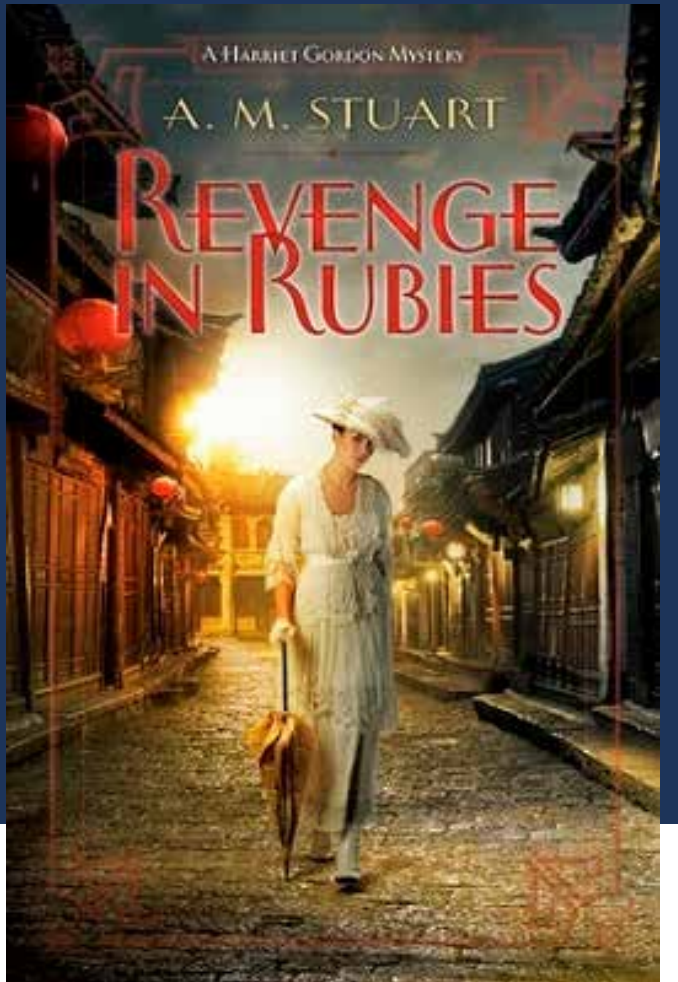


CHARLOTTE QUINN

The Good Daughter

Charlotte and Samantha Quinn were living a charmed life in a small town when their family was attacked, leaving their mother dead. The tragedy shattered their happy existence.

Twenty-eight years later, violence once again finds its way to their small town. Charlotte, having followed in her father's footsteps to become an attorney, is a witness to a crime, bringing back memories of the tragedy from so long ago. The situation forces her to confront her past and the truth of what occurred. Charlotte, or Charlie as she is called, is a fearless, strong character. Critics called this chilling thriller emotionally raw.



HARRIOT GORDON

Revenge in Rubies

Book two in the Harriet Gordon mystery series is set in Singapore, 1910. Harriet Gordon is settling into a comfortable life with her ward, her brother, and a typing job. When her boss is called to the gruesome murder scene of the young wife of a lieutenant, Harriet suddenly finds herself thrown into the investigation. But using her ties to the family of the deceased means facing her own secrets.

Harriet Gordon is a standout character, frustrated by the standing of women in the turn-of-the-century time period. Her practical and matter-of-fact approach makes her unique in the genre.



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.

There’s Good Money in It

BY JILL HAND

Wayne Colton steered the sputtering Honda Rebel into the parking lot outside Little Frostee, black smoke billowing from the motorcycle’s rusted tailpipe. Before Wayne could turn off the ignition the engine coughed and died. He didn’t bother trying to restart it; when the Rebel stalled it stayed stalled, sometimes for ten minutes, sometimes longer. He dismounted and gave it a sullen glare.

“You’re a piece of shit,” he told it.

The Rebel didn’t reply. It remained humbly mute, as if it was aware of its deficiencies, and regretted them, but being only a machine, was unable to correct them. It needed a new clutch and a new alternator and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

The truth was the Rebel had no business being on the road at all. Wayne hadn’t been sure it would be up to the task of transporting him five miles from his apartment to Little Frostee and back. There was no way it could make a round trip of thirty miles to Monson’s Lake and home again without breaking down. Monson’s Lake was where Wayne’s potential customer was. The deserted picnic area behind the Little Frostee ice cream stand had been a compromise, a grudging one, judging by the customer’s irritated attitude.

“It better be worth it,” the man had said, threateningly. “You’re making me drag my ass all the way out there when by rights you should come to me. You’re going to have to give me a discount for making me go all the way out there.”

Jesus Christ, he’s carrying on as if I asked him to meet me in Vladivostok, Wayne thought.

He explained to the customer, a guy named Paul, about the problems with the motorcycle. Paul was unsympathetic. He listened in chilly silence as Wayne stammered an apology. He said he was going to get the bike fixed the first chance he got, but for now he was stone broke and had no other means of transportation.

Paul snorted, lordly and contemptuous, as if he were the emperor of the world instead of an assistant deli manager. Wayne pleaded with him, saying how it would be a big favor

if Paul would agree to meet him closer to where he, Wayne, lived.

“All right. I guess I can do that,” Paul said grudgingly.

Wayne leaned the bike on its kickstand, popped open the hard vinyl case behind the seat and removed a plastic shopping bag. He carried it past the small wood-frame building, home to Little Frostee, purveyor of ice cream since 1967. A sign in the widow said CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. SEE YOU NEXT SPRING!

A Jeep was parked in front, but there was nobody in it. Wayne went out back and seated himself at one of the splintery wooden picnic tables, taking care to choose the one least splattered with bird shit. Then he waited.

Inside the shopping bag was a box containing a laptop computer. Wayne had advertised it for sale in *Nickel Ned’s Weekly Bargain Shopper*, an online publication similar to Craigslist. *Nickle Ned’s* was based out of Burlington, Vermont. People in that neck of the woods used it to advertise items for sale—everything from taxidermy equipment to trailer hitches to diamond engagement rings. There were listings of services that people were willing to perform. There were notices for upcoming community events, such as the Monson’s Lake Firemen’s Carnival and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony in the pretty little village of Weston.

Nickel Ned’s motto was “We Have Something for Everyone.”

The laptop in Wayne’s ad was a good one, a Dijan-Tech 3000. It retailed for around four thousand dollars. It was brand new, still in its original packaging, the sales receipt included. Wayne was asking \$1,900 for it. That was a real bargain, yet Paul demanded an even deeper discount, due to the inconvenience of having to drive ten miles to pick it up. They settled on \$1,800. Paul promised to bring cash and the appointment was made for 12:30 p.m.

Wayne shook his head. *The nerve of some people*, he thought. *The guy knows I’m desperate. He’s getting a fantastic bargain and yet he had to go and demand that I take off an extra hundred bucks.*



There’s a reason why people are warned against conducting financial transactions with strangers in secluded places. Sometimes the strangers are honest. Sometimes they’re not. Sometimes they mean to do you harm. The latter is what happened behind Little Frostee on that cold autumn day with its hand on the doorknob of winter.

It’s beautiful up there, in the Green Mountain National Forest. It’s wild and untamed, home to bears and foxes and moose. There are gorges and waterfalls and breathtakingly spectacular scenery. In spring and summer the forest trails are in constant use by hikers and bird watchers and nature lovers of all sorts. Campers set up temporary housekeeping in the lean-tos and designated camping sites, and the lakes are filled with recreational boaters and fishermen.

All that changes when cold weather sets in. It’s still beautiful, but it’s a cold, stern beauty, all granite grey and charcoal. There are still people around, but they’re mainly on the ski slopes: Bromley or Magic Mountain or Killington, staying in one of the hotels. You might hear a loon making its weird laughing call or see a long-legged moose amble across the

road, in no hurry to get to wherever it’s headed.

By late November the hiking trails were nearly deserted, the leaf-peepers gone home, the trees having finished putting on their annual show, turning their foliage into an extravaganza of flaming cinnabar red and tangerine orange and intense, eye-throbbing yellow.

Wayne rubbed his arms as a chilly gust of wind ruffled his shoulder-length hair. He should have dressed warmer. As it was, he wore jeans and a thin navy-blue hoodie over a much-laundered t-shirt which advertised a defunct rock band called Seven Layers of Ants. Where the hell was Paul? Had he brought the laptop all the way out here for nothing? Would the Rebel start again or would he have to call around, looking for somebody to give him a ride home?

Paul had phoned as soon as the ad went live. He pelted Wayne with questions about the laptop—about the graphics card, and the processor, and the display refresh rate and whether it had NVIDIA G-Synch. He could have found all that out by going online and reading up on the specs of the Dijan-Tech 3000, but perhaps he thought Wayne was lying and the



laptop he was selling wasn't a 3000 at all, but a lesser model.

"I'm a gamer," Paul said importantly. "I play *Mongolian Warlord* and *Chimp-Out Road Rage* and *Desert Fox Tank Battle* and *Xardon: Mage of Atlantis*. I need advanced eye tracking to measure my mini-map awareness."

"Then this ought to be exactly what you're looking for," Wayne told him. "I was going to get more into gaming. That's why I bought it, but my hours at work got cut back. I hate to let it go, but I need the money."

"Yeah, too bad. So listen, can you bring it over here so I can see it? I'm at work." That's how they arrived upon the compromise of meeting at Little Frostee. Paul sounded so disgruntled about it that Wayne wasn't surprised when ten minutes passed beyond the time of their appointed rendezvous, then fifteen, then twenty-five, with no sign of Paul. He consulted his phone. No texts. It appeared Paul was going to be a no-show. Could he be that much of an arrogant prick that he was going to pass up a chance to get one of the best laptops on the market for next to nothing? Probably not, Wayne thought. Probably the lure of a brand-new Dijan-Tech 3000, the latest thing in gaming computers, would prove irresistible. He suspected Paul was deliberately taking his time, making Wayne wait in order to get even with him for forcing him to leave his comfy lair behind the deli counter.

Wayne put the bag containing the laptop on the table, smoothing it out and positioning it so the Consumer Tech Warehouse logo was facing up. He wanted to make a nice

visual presentation for when Paul got there.

He got up and walked around, stamping his feet to warm them and listening to the sound of birds chirping and warbling and screeching in the woods. He rubbed his hands together. He'd forgotten to bring gloves and his fingers were getting numb.

Finally, just as Wayne decided that Paul wasn't coming, there was a sound of tires crunching through gravel, followed by a car door slamming.

A man appeared from around the side of the building. He was short and fat and his face wore a haughty expression. His shaved head was the color and shape of a canned ham. He looked precisely the way Wayne had pictured him from their telephone conversation.

"Paul? Hi! Glad you could make it," he said, extending a hand for him to shake.

Paul ignored Wayne's outstretched hand and jerked his chin at the table. "Is that the laptop?"

"Yes. I was starting to wonder if you were coming. The rent's due on Monday and I was worried I wouldn't be able to pay it. Now I can. That's a relief. I hope you enjoy the laptop. I wish I could keep it."

Paul looked at him in such a way as to make it clear that he couldn't care less about Wayne or his financial problems.

"Let's see it," he said.

Wayne opened the bag and took out the laptop.

"The receipt's included. Not that you'll have any problems,

but if you do you can take it back to the store. It comes with a four-year warranty," he said.

Paul eyed him craftily. "The thing is I'm kind of short on cash myself. I can give you seventeen hundred, but that's it."

"On the phone you said eighteen hundred."

Wayne couldn't believe Paul was doing this to him.

"Look," he said. "Come on. I really need the money. You said eighteen hundred. This is a four-thousand-dollar laptop."

"Sorry, brah. Seventeen. Take it or leave it. You're lucky I'm giving you that much. You're lucky I'm giving you anything. Meeting way out here in the boondocks like this, with nobody around? I could have been some scumbag who pulled a knife on you, took the laptop and left you stony-ass broke."

Wayne slid the laptop back in the bag, seeing that Paul was determined to get the upper hand. Paul took out his wallet and began counting out one-hundred-dollar bills. "Just went to the bank. Got you nice, crisp new bills," he said cheerfully.

From the woods behind them came the sound of approaching footsteps crunching through fallen leaves. Paul and Wayne turned to look.

A hiker stepped out from among the trees. He was a tall young guy who wore hiking boots, a black watch cap and a red-and-black Buffalo plaid wool jacket. Seeing Wayne and Paul, he grinned. "Hey! How ya doin'? Would you believe it? There's a herd of deer back there."

He gestured to where a trail came out of the woods. Next to it was a rustic wooden signpost shaped like a pointing finger. Burnt into it was "Tumbling Waters Gorge, 2.4 miles."

"I never saw so many deer in one place before. It was like a deer convention, the way they were all hanging out together," the man said, walking toward them. Noticing the bag on the table he asked, "What have you got there?"

"It's a laptop," said Paul, money in hand, having paused in the act of counting out bills.

"Gosh! Is it a good one?"

"Yes." Paul said stiffly. "I'm buying it from this man here."

"Can I see it?"

Wayne removed the laptop from the bag. The hiker stepped closer.

"That is a good one," the hiker said. He turned to Paul. "How much are you giving him for it?"

"I don't see that it's any of your ..."

Wayne suspected Paul was about to say "business," but he stopped abruptly when he saw the gun in the hiker's hand. The gun was small and black. Despite its diminutive size it looked coldly efficient, as if it would have no problem blowing holes into both of them.

"Give me the laptop. Hand over your wallets. Come on, hurry up. I'm a busy man. I've got miles to go before I sleep. That's from a poem, by a dude named Robert Frost," said the hiker.

"Shit! I can't believe this," Wayne said.

The hiker swung the gun so it was leveled at Wayne's face. "Believe it, *caballero*. Wallets and money. *Andele! Andele!* Time's a-wasting!"

They did as the hiker instructed, placing their wallets on the picnic table. The hiker scooped them up and pocketed them. Then he took the sheaf of bills from Paul's hand and put it in the bag with the laptop. He took off toward the parking lot, carrying the bag with the laptop in it. Paul and Wayne watched him go. They heard a car door slam, followed by the

sound of an engine starting and a vehicle leaving.

"I saw a Jeep when I got here. Is it yours?" Paul asked Wayne.

"No. The motorcycle's mine," Wayne said. "I can't believe what just happened. That asshole robbed us."

Paul got out his cell phone. "I'm calling the cops. I wish I could remember the license plate number on that Jeep." He stared at the phone and groaned. "Damn it, I can't call from here!"

There was no cellular service in the picnic grove.

"God damn it! He took my wallet! Now I've got to find someplace where there's a cell signal."

Paul stomped away, without a backward glance at Wayne.

Wayne sat there, thinking about what had happened.

Eighty miles away and three hours later, Wayne was in the town of Inlet, New York. He was seated in an elegant restaurant. The hostess had ushered him to a prime table overlooking the lake. The lighting was soft, the wait staff obsequious. On the table where Wayne sat were a flickering candle and a crystal vase containing a perfect red rose.

Wayne ordered a glass of wine. A man in a tuxedo was at a baby grand piano, tickling the ivories. He played "Autumn in New York" before segueing into "Moonlight in Vermont." Wayne cut into a juicy 14-ounce rib eye steak. He savored the wine and the steak and the view of the lake, pretty as a postcard. He didn't notice when the hiker from the picnic grove who had taken his wallet and the computer came in. The hiker walked up to Wayne's table. He was wearing a fine suit instead of his former rugged outdoor gear.

Wayne was looking good himself. No longer the down-at-the-heels loser in scuffed-up sneakers and threadbare jeans, he had on a suit custom made by Italian designer Enzo D'Orsini and a pair of highly polished John Lobb wingtips.

The hiker pulled out a chair and sat down. He slid Wayne's wallet across the table to him. "He had two-thousand, eight-hundred and twelve dollars," he said. "Your half's in here. I already took mine. The laptop's in my car. I saw your BMW when I pulled in. Decided against taking the Rebel, huh?"

Wayne laughed. "That piece of crap? Hardly. But it served its purpose. Old ham-face thought I was broke. You should try some of this wine."

A waiter glided up to the table. Wayne asked him to bring him another glass of wine and one for his friend. Then he changed his mind. "What the heck, bring the bottle. We're celebrating the conclusion of a successful a business deal," he said.

"Congratulations, sir," said the waiter. "May I ask what business you're in?"

"Computers," said Wayne.

"We're consultants," said the hiker who wasn't really a hiker. "Computer consultants. There's good money in it."

Jill Hand is the author of the Trapnell Thrillers, *White Oaks* and *Black Willows*. Her work has appeared in many anthologies, most recently *The Pulp Horror Book of Phobias, Vol. 2*, and *A Walk in a Darker Wood: An Anthology of Folk Horror*.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SUMMER

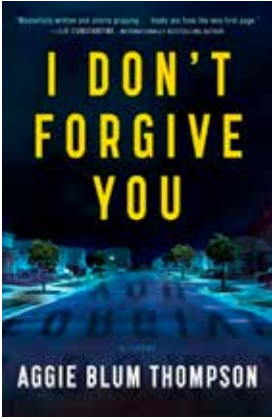


A Dark and Secret Place
Jen Williams

A shocking suicide. A tin of letters to a serial killer. A mysterious past. Heather Evans has never been particularly close with her mother. In fact, after her mother's sudden suicide, Heather finds out she had a secret life. She had been writing letters to a convicted serial killer for years, Michael Reave, the notorious Red Wolf. Just as Heather arrives at her mother's house and starts to process her loss, more murdered women are turning up. These women are killed in the same way as the Red Wolf's victims, which is a problem; he has been locked in a maximum security prison for years. The Red Wolf is Heather's only connection with her mother—the last person alive who really knew her. Heather's journalist instincts kick in, and she has to speak with the Red Wolf. At the prison, she finds a complex man

who talks mainly by retelling old fairy tales. Something isn't right, and Heather starts to notice things in her mother's house being moved around. She spots shadows at the edge of the woods. Someone is coming for Heather, and she needs to find out why. Jen Williams uses lyrical storytelling to create an ominous tale full of chilling moments. Heather is an interesting and relatable main character with lots of gumption. Even when she is safe, she's bound to soon throw herself into another precarious situation. Williams uses old fairy tales to add to the mystery and create a complex serial killer. The book builds slowly, adding a new layer of the story bit by bit. Heather's journey to learn about her mother's past is compelling. At times, the chapters flip to give the reader Michael's perspective in the past. *A Dark and Secret Place* will have you chasing down a serial killer, heart pounding, and make you want to leave the lights on at night.

Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann

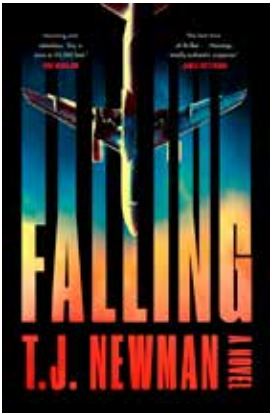


I Don't Forgive You
Aggie Blum Thompson

Photographer Allie Ross is trying to find her place among the women in an upscale Washington, DC neighborhood where she's recently moved with her lawyer husband, Mark, and young son, Cole. Being accepted is important to Mark's career as he climbs the corporate ladder, so it's imperative that Allie make friends and fit in with the neighborhood moms. Unfortunately, the harder Allie tries, the more obvious it becomes that she's an outsider and unlikely to be accepted into the established mom cliques. In a last-ditch effort, Allie agrees to attend a neighborhood block party where she once again finds herself standing on the sidelines. When another dad strikes up a flirtatious conversation, Allie plays along until a combo of alcohol and a disturbing reference to her secret past send her fleeing to the bathroom, where she fends off a sexual assault. Allie makes a spur-of-the-moment decision to not share details of the troubling attack with Mark, which comes back to

haunt her the next day when news of the neighborhood dad's overnight death circulates like wildfire. The rumor mill is running rampant, and it's only a matter of time until intimate pictures of Allie and the guy from the party surface on the internet, fueling gossip and suspicion. Much to her surprise and her husband's shock, Allie becomes the prime suspect in a murder investigation. The story that unfolds is unsettling. Tinder and Facebook accounts indicate Allie is living a double life—and only one of them is as a wife and mother. She claims she's being framed by someone from her past, but the evidence of her guilt is insurmountable. Allie sets out to prove her innocence, which means opening old wounds. Undoubtedly, someone knows her secret and blames her for what happened way back in high school. Someone who doesn't forgive her. There's nothing better than a dark, twisted thriller that keeps readers flipping pages looking for answers. It's hard to know what or whom to believe as shocking revelations move the story forward at a furious pace. Fans of suspense thrillers are going to love this one. It's a page burner that demands reading straight through in one sitting.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



Falling
T.J. Newman

Falling has a simple but terrific premise. Bill, a pilot, is preparing for his next flight to New York when he gets a Face-time from a stranger telling him that his wife and his children have been kidnapped. The only way to save them is by crashing the plane and killing everyone inside of it. The reader is left completely in the dark at the start of the book while the antagonist slowly reveals more information about his motives and his hidden past. A classic dilemma with a hard decision. Will Bill ever be able to make a decision, and will his morals stop him? The characters in this novel are incredible likeable and rootable. Even readers who would usually prefer characters who are a little rough around the edges won't be able to help but cheer for Bill, his family, the crew, and (most) of the passengers every step of the way. One particularly relatable character is the cabin leader, Jo, who must navigate the entire group through nearly impossible situations.

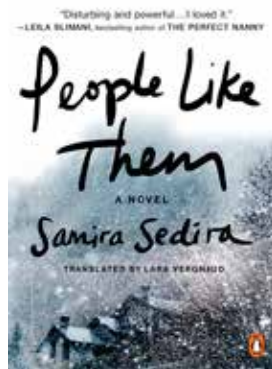
Author T.J. Newman has a background as a flight attendant, so writing this book is something of a true calling. As a result, there's a lot of depth and detail that just wouldn't have been captured if any other mystery or thriller author had written the same book. The reader may even feel as if they're at the movies, especially during the graphic opening, so if you're missing the theatres *Falling* could be the perfect summer read. Newman creates a suprising amount of tension and suspense with this locked-room setting. There's a mid-way twist that readers may not be expecting to happen so soon, along with a lot of moments where you may find yourself shocked. You may not be entirely sure how it will end, but you'll know you have to finish it as fast as possible! The pacing does not let up and you will be consistently entertained from cover to cover. Be prepared to devour this book in only a few hours. You won't want to miss out when people are talking about this one a lot in the next few months. T.J. Newman is a debut author to watch.

Reviewed by Max Birner

“CHASING THE BOOGEYMAN
does what true crime so often cannot: it offers both chills and a satisfying conclusion.”
—STEPHEN KING

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People Like Them

Samira Sedira

People Like Them is a short and shocking exploration of what can happen when the worst-case scenario becomes chilling reality.

In 2003, in the Alpine Haute-Savoie region of France, the five members of the Flactif family went missing. They were later discovered murdered by their next-door neighbor over a seemingly minor dispute.

Samira Sedira has taken these events and extrapolated them into the fictional *People Like Them*; her English language debut, and an impressive one, at that.

Alternating between past and present, the mystery is not who did it—we know that from the start—but rather what could have pushed them to that point. It all unfolds one layer at a time, slowly building a picture and a foundation to a story that leaves the reader feeling bad for everyone involved. This

may be a fictional take, but the author deftly avoids the easier black-and-white morality in favor of the much more complex and realistic shades of grey.

This kind of novel takes a delicate hand, and the author doesn't waste a single word. Nothing takes place in a vacuum, and packed into these pages is an honest, but sensitive, portrayal of a confluence of events and timing that leads to the murder of an entire family. It's an intense read, almost claustrophobic—but to expand it would have diluted the impact. It should be shocking, but it also has to be readable, and it's a fine line that the author and the translator have managed with precision. Most importantly, perhaps, this is the kind of book that you shouldn't pick up late at night, because you won't be putting it down again anytime soon. *People Like Them* is the best kind of compulsive and will keep you glued to its pages until they're done.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook



The Final Girl Support Group

Grady Hendrix

In every good horror movie there's a final girl. The last girl left when the killing is done and the monster has been conquered. These are the survivors, the girls who fought back and defeated the bad guy. But what happens to the final girl after that?

The Final Girl Support Group follows Lynnette, a real-life final girl who is just trying to survive.

Her life is filled with fear and paranoia, and the only thing keeping her afloat is her support group. Lynnette and five other final girls have been meeting for years, trying to cope with their unique situations.

But their stories are not done yet. One day, one of them misses a meeting, and it's just the beginning of something bigger to come. The final girls are being hunted, and it's exactly what Lynnette has trained for. She knew one day she would need to be prepared, so she sets out to try to figure out who wants them dead, and why.

At its heart, *The Final Girl Support Group* is about female empowerment. Final girls are their own heroes. They know that, sometimes, no one is coming to save you, and you have to save yourself. The book explores all the ways we cope with trauma and how everyone has their own story. The heroines are flawed and inspiring and relatable in every way.

Once the action starts, it doesn't let up. The reader is briskly moved through action, heartbreak, pain, sorrow, and strength. It's easy for readers to feel as if they're going on a journey with the characters and are completely invested in their stories. The twists just kept coming! You may think you have it all figured out, but Grady Hendrix will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very end.

This could easily be one of the best books of the year, and one all women can relate to for the power it gives us to believe in ourselves. We all have the potential to be a final girl, someone who will never quit or back down. It's a thrilling story with fantastic writing and captivating character development. But the real takeaway is how it can make us feel. Welcome to *The Final Girl Support Group*.

Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann

A FORMER ARMY VETERAN FINDS HERSELF A PAWN IN A DEADLY GAME WITH RUSSIA.

“One of the very best thrillers you’ll read this year.”

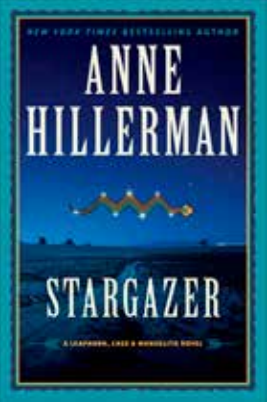
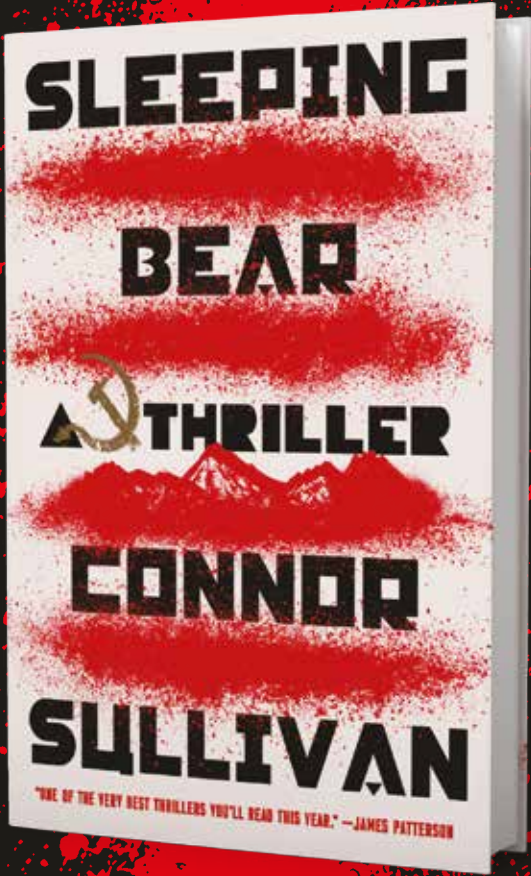
—JAMES PATTERSON, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“A fierce, relentless beast of a novel!”

—TESS GERRITSEN, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Earning a spot on the shelf among Brad Thor, Vince Flynn, and Jack Carr. Don’t miss this stunning debut.”

—GREGG HURWITZ, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ORPHAN X SERIES



Stargazer

Anne Hillerman

Dr. Steve Jones is an astronomer at New Mexico's Very Large Array (VLA) observatory, which listens for radio waves that could emanate from alien life forms. Jones recently relocated from Hawaii to New Mexico and hopes to reconcile with his estranged wife, Maya, a Navajo woman who took the couple's son, Junior, and returned to her reservation years ago. Steve

now wants to be a family again.

Jones takes Maya out for dinner, planning to woo her back. Instead, Maya presents Steve with divorce papers. This leads to angry words and threats, and Steve is found in his car the next day, shot in the head. Officer Tara Williams of the Socorro County Sheriff's Department gets the case and begins her investigation.

Meanwhile, Maya's brother calls Officer Bernie Manuelito of the Navajo Tribal Police Department. His sister was supposed to collect Junior from his house, but never showed up. Bernie and Maya were roommates in college, and Bernie gets right on the job looking for her friend.

Bernie phones Officer Williams to ask about a missing woman from Socorro and learns that Maya's husband was

just killed. Not long after, Maya shows up, confessing to the murder of her husband.

Bernie refuses to believe Maya is guilty and wants to help investigate Steve's death. However, Bernie's husband, Officer Jim Chee—who's in charge of the department while the captain is at a conference—wants Bernie to follow up on her other cases. This results in friction between the usually harmonious couple. To add to Bernie's troubles, her mother is suffering from dementia, and Bernie is torn between her family responsibilities and her desire to become a police investigator, which requires more time away from home.

Bernie winds up helping Officer Williams investigate the homicide and learns that there are more possible suspects than Maya. It seems VLA scientists have been accused of stealing research, and Steve's romantic relationship with a woman recently ended.

As always in this series, the thriller has a dramatic climax that will have readers on the edge of their seats.

Anne Hillerman inherited the mantle of Navajo mysteries from her father, Tony Hillerman, whose first Leaphorn/Chee mystery was published more than fifty years ago. Like her dad, Anne incorporates Navajo history, beliefs, and myths—as well as the beautiful Southwestern landscape—into her books, which adds to the pleasure of reading them.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer

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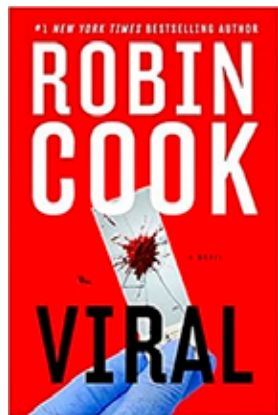
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Viral

Robin Cook

In Robin Cook's latest novel, the Murphys—Brian, Emma, and four-year-old Juliette—are enjoying a weeklong vacation in Cape Cod when Emma is bitten by a tiger mosquito. Days later, she is experiencing flu-like symptoms and is unable to get out of bed.

Brian quickly packs up their rental house to return to New York City. As they get close to

their home in Inwood, Emma begins seizing. The family rushes straight to the ER, where Emma falls into a coma.

As she is admitted, doctors diagnose her with Eastern equine encephalitis, a mosquito-borne viral disease caught during one of their beach excursions. While Emma remains in a coma, Brian is called to the business office of the hospital where he has been informed that his insurance company has denied the claim for Emma's admittance to ER.

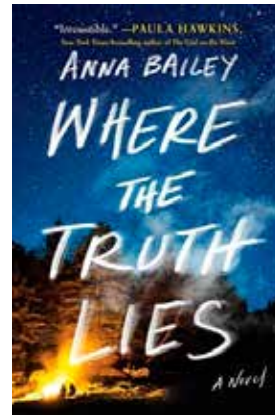
The book's title, *Viral*, may lead readers to believe the story is about a virus. However, the actual virus Emma faces is only a small part of this novel. The majority focuses on the preda-

tory practices of some of the players in the health insurance industry. Once Brian begins to fight his behemoth insurance company, he learns about all the policies and clauses of the plan he has signed onto without reading. When young Juliette exhibits symptoms of encephalitis, Brian has already been put into collections by the hospital. He has no choice but to bring her to the same hospital ER, where he feels he is treated unfairly because of the debt owed.

Viral takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic, though it is only mentioned in terms of wearing masks and other safety protocols. The plot really concerns Brian's health insurance battle and his fight to get the hospital to take care of his wife and child despite his debt.

Brian is a formidable character who doesn't always act in a way that one would expect given his circumstances. At times, he reacts with little discussion or thoughts of grief, seeming almost paranoid in his attempt to force doctors to treat his daughter. Overall, the novel is well thought-out, the characters are interesting and relatable, and the fast pacing keeps things moving. Readers will be eager to read more of Cook's novels.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



Where the Truth Lies

Anna Bailey

Anna Bailey's debut brings readers a dark, disturbing, emotional, and atmospheric crime novel set in the small town of Whistling Ridge, Colorado. A teenaged girl, Abigail Blake, disappears after leaving a party and going into the woods. She had come to the party with her friend Emma, who feels guilty for not waiting on her friend

and commits to finding out what really happened to Abigail. Did she meet someone, and if so, who? Most, including the police, believe she ran away from home.

Many characters in this novel are nasty, spiteful, obnoxious, malicious, and mean-spirited, and that is describing them mildly. They seemed very real, and it is daunting to imagine a town that contains this many vile characters. However, there are a few characters that stand out positively. One is Abigail's younger brother, Jude. Another is Emma. Despite her problems, she is trying to do the right thing. The

third is Rat, a Romanian living in an RV. While he had some problems, he basically wants to help Emma.

The plot is quite dark and contains several twists that are interwoven well. The author does a great job of world-building. The small-town atmosphere comes through, but not in a positive way as often seen in novels. This one is full of secrets, alcoholism, racism, and a charismatic pastor who advocates violence and intolerance. Add to this drugs, domestic violence, bad parenting, bullying, and much more. What do you get? A suspenseful and emotional novel that pulls a reader in and keeps one looking for something hopeful in Whistling Ridge.

Overall, this book is a study of many characters and group dynamics that is intense, compelling, thought-provoking, and impactful. What will Emma find out as she digs into Abigail's disappearance and learns that Abi had her own secrets? Will she solve the puzzle of her friend's disappearance? It is not an easy book to read, but it is important to understand that attitudes and behaviors such as those shown in this story exist.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



The Influencer

Miranda Rijks

Skye Walker (just Skye, please) is a social media influencer who is worshipped by millions. Nathan is the head of a small charity, Sacha's Sanctuary, founded in memory of his late wife to support the homeless. Skye, formerly homeless herself, would like to support his charity at no cost.

Skye's homelessness jump-started her career. It's how she got herself off the streets. There's an old saying that when something seems too good to be true, it usually is. While Nathan does not know who Skye is, his teenage daughters do and urge him to take the offer.

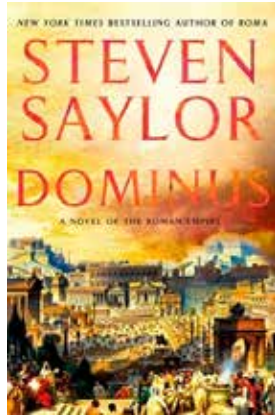
As Skye gets more involved with Sacha's Sanctuary, Nathan feels she wants to be more involved in his personal life than he is comfortable with. She seems to show up wherever he is and, more concernedly, where his daughters are. He realizes their business partnership really is too good to be true. Things spiral out of control and he starts to distance himself from Skye. When his beloved fiancé, Marie, leaves him, it forces Nathan to decide if Skye's involvement in his charity is worth the extra money she is bringing in.

Skye is a very well-written character, and the author does an outstanding job describing what goes on behind the scenes of an influencer. Skye starts out as such a likeable character, but begins to crack almost immediately. The story itself starts when she is a teenager and homeless, having just been rescued by a wealthy teen who is unhappy with her own home life. The character development is spot on for both Nathan and Skye.

The Influencer is told from two points of view, Nathan's and Skye's, and it really helps the reader understand their thoughts. It also moves the story along at a nice pace. The reader can see exactly when the story turns and becomes dangerous. The book also flashes back to Skye's story with the wealthy teen who helped her, Tiffany, helping us see who Skye was before she became an influencer.

This book had all the things that make a strong psychological thriller: anticipation, suspense, well-written dialogue, and many gasp-worthy moments. Readers will feel engaged with the characters and story, excited to find out the next twist. The very last twist is unexpected and may leave readers wondering whether there will be another book starring that character. *The Influencer* is a roller coaster of emotions, but one you won't want to get off too quickly.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



Dominus

Steven Saylor

AD 165. Rome has reached its pinnacle, with lands stretching far and a prosperous city. But now the ravages of disease weigh heavily, and it seems as there are two plagues going on: one that kills and the other that brings charlatans and false prophets who take advantage.

Among them are those who call themselves Christians—and

one of them is named Justin. He refuses to worship gods and aggressively recruits young Romans into his cult. When Lucius Pinarius, senator, confronts the man, he unnerves him. Justin comes across as being right about everything, which would make others, including the emperors, wrong. When Lucius tries to reason with Justin, it is to no avail. There is no way you can reason with someone who knows he is right. Lucius cannot save Justin from his punishing sentence. “The law must follow its course.”

Commodus becomes Marcus Aurelius’s successor and is given the title Augustus. He is not interested in wars. He

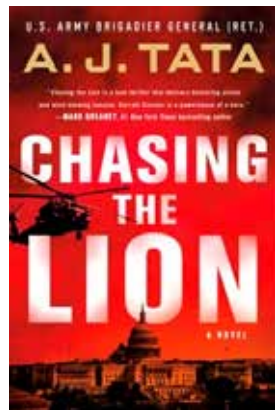
wants to enjoy the fruits of peace. After the great fire, Commodus, who has a passion for gladiators and chariots, has even more reason to build an amphitheater. Commodus makes himself unpopular with high-born people, but popular with low-born ones. The Roman Games will offer entertainment to the poor as never before seen in Rome.

This story spans 160 years, bringing in many emperors. Some want a return to the sound government of the past, and others bring chaos from the start. Some are bold, claiming only one god, something that doesn’t sit well with the others. Some are hardly old enough to rule an empire.

Dominus explores many changes within the empire, including religious beliefs. It offers a vivid portrayal of Christianity, which is viewed as something to fear and be eradicated by some emperors, and then later tolerated by others. It depicts everyday lives and customs, including the passion for gladiators and chariots. The thread that connects all those changes is generations of Lucius Pinarius family.

The constant changes in the empire keep readers on edge with rivalry among men and scheming among women. The historical background is rich in detail, giving readers a vivid picture of ancient Rome and its tumultuous period.

Reviewed by Annette Bukowiec



Chasing the Lion

A.J. Tata

Jump feet first into this relentless, high-octane action thriller starring General Garrett Sinclair—somewhat of a hybrid between Lee Child’s Jack Reacher, Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry, and Daniel Silva’s Gabriel Allon.

Ever since the COVID-19 outbreak, Sinclair’s responsibilities have included commanding the counterterrorism task force and

neutralizing threats—like Iranian General Dariush Parizad, who follows in the footsteps of Bin Laden, Al-Baghdadi, and Soleimani. Dariush is now the heir apparent to Qasem Soleimani and deemed the number-one terrorist in the world. He has assumed the mantle of commander of the Quds Force. His hatred of America is personal.

As a youth, he witnessed a drone strike during the ill-fated Operation Eagle Claw in 1980. In this unsuccessful attempt to rescue hostages from Iran, an errant drone hit near his home in Tabas and obliterated his father. The site of devastation was visited by Ayatollah Khomeini, who proclaimed that Dariush would be known as The Lion of Tabas. Since then, he has progressively risen in the ranks of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard to leadership, with the goal of raining hell onto the “Great Satan” nation of the United States.

A long-term plan was initiated by Soleimani, with the strategic infiltration of the U.S. by sleeper cells. They have been in place long enough to establish citizenship, which allowed them to purchase and accumulate an armory of assault weapons, pistols, and ammunition.

Intel has linked Parizad with the development of agent known as Demon Rain. It has the hallucinogenic properties of LSD with the added effect of potential mind manipulation, which is triggered through images broadcast on the victim’s personal cell phone. It can also be mixed with sarin gas for greater lethality. Although most effective by direct injection, it apparently has been aerosolized for greater impact. Its potential effect is staggering.

Parizad considers the U.S. ripe for attack. The country has never been so divided politically and is still reeling from the pandemic. What better time to wreak havoc than on the precipice of the inauguration of the first woman president?

Retired General A.J. Tata proves to be a masterful storyteller. He weaves an action-packed narrative brimming with authentic sequences as can be told only through the eyes of someone who has experienced the devastation of war. The result is a riveting and deadly cat-and-mouse chase that is truly cinematic and escalates into an exhilarating denouement. Hopefully further exploits of Garrett Sinclair will follow.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs

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