

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

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MAGAZINE



PLAYING WITH FIRE

What sparks in the
mind of an arsonist?

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**Feature: Life Lessons from
Private Eye Fiction**
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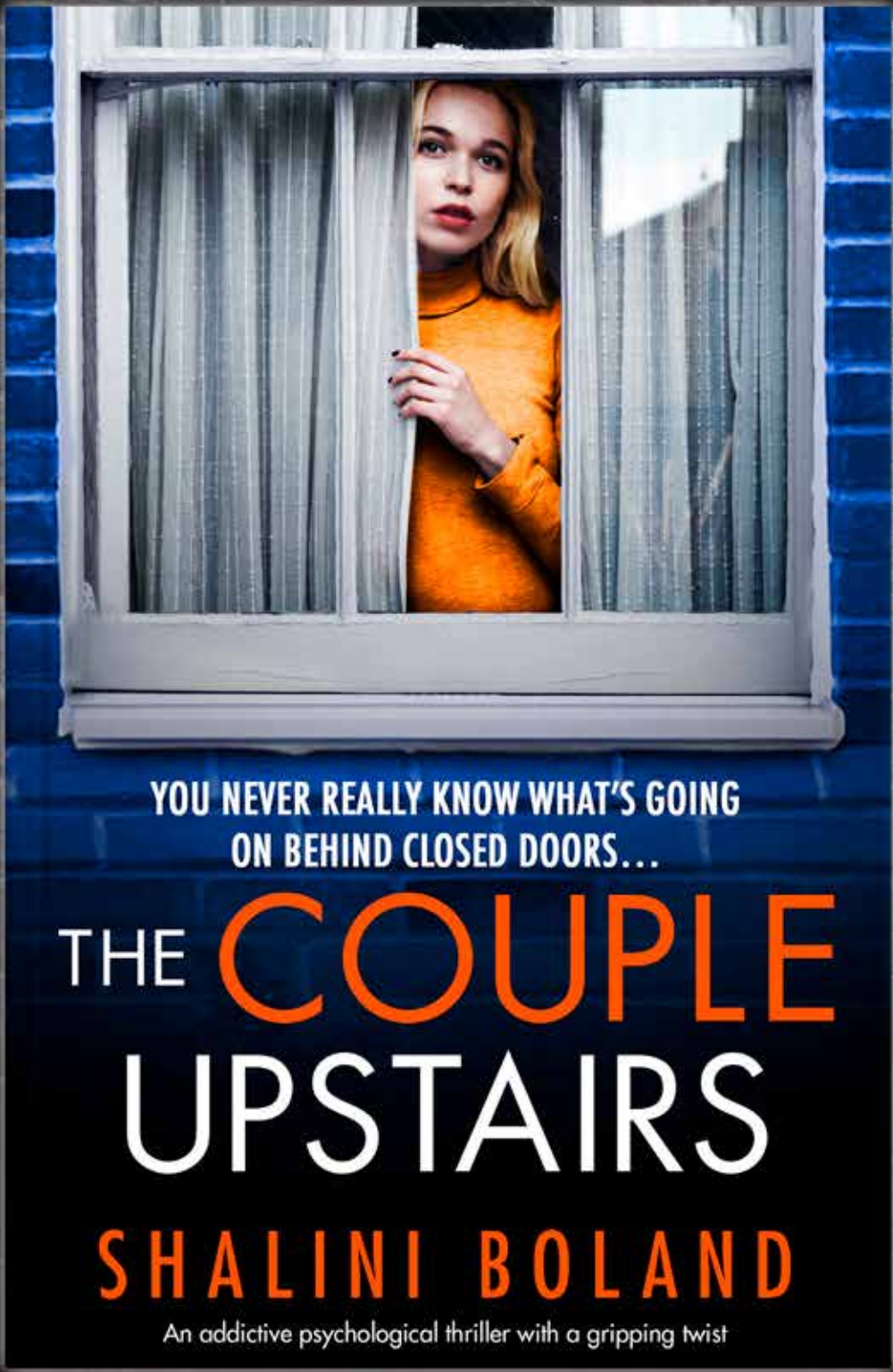
Author Q&A: Lisa Jewell

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**Feature: In Search of the Great
Financial Thriller**
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**Short Fiction:
"Throwing Flags"**
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**Reviews: *The Package*,
Steel Fear, *Tell Me*, and more**

From the **USA TODAY**
bestselling author



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There's nothing like a good book to help you fall gently into the autumn season



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

Fall is a time for snuggling up with a good book. Sure, let summer have its beach reads; fall is the season for wrapping yourself in a blanket and slowing down. A table set with pumpkin pie and roasted chestnuts. A mug of coffee or cocoa. Maybe, if the weather gets cold enough, you'll throw some logs on the fire and really get in that reading mood.

And what better time to dive into a story of suspense or mystery? The nights are getting longer, the leaves are coming off the trees. Is that murder in the air? Thankfully, only on the page.

This issue is full of adventure, with stories of arson, private eyes, financial thrillers, chainsaws, and much more. Perfect for a cold night, wrapped up in that blanket, where nothing can hurt you. Or can it?

All the best,
Sam

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Submit features, author interviews, reviews, and short fiction to sam@mysteryandsuspense.com.

All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Private Eye Fiction

BY MAX TOMLINSON

Yes, they're pulpy, often packed with type characters and trope situations, with guns sliding across floors, and sometimes they lean toward the unintentionally humorous in their hardboiled prose. Sure, a few have transcended the genre to become "literary" and discussed in theses and college classes, but most reside firmly in the guilty pleasure department.

Detective novels: Comic books without pictures? Or valuable life lessons to guide you through this treacherous web we weave?

Stay with me as we ponder the latter.

An extremely popular self-help book published in 2004 had no private eyes in it whatsoever, not

one single car chase, or a shocking twist at the end. It listed sixteen qualities one hopefully learned in kindergarten. These "uncommon thoughts" were to put you in good stead until the day they put you in a box and dropped you unceremoniously into a dark hole. But what if you were eating library paste when most of these formative lessons were meant to be gelling in your soft young brain? Fear not. Reading Spenser novels later in life can make up for life's object lessons, according to a study by a prestigious university.*

With apologies to Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*.

*Not really.



1. Share everything.

Wouldn't that be nice? But read *The Maltese Falcon*. Not a whole bunch of sharing going on here. Also the reason many investigators are employed in the first place, locating items that were not appropriately shared. Which is another way of saying they were taken without permission.**

2. Play fair.

Any pulp novel will confirm the only guys doing this are hardened loners who sleep in a shoulder holster. Covering a huge swath of human behavior, this rule basically says those who cheat don't fare (which is a homonym of fair) well in the end. The jury's still out though. But if you don't want some gumshoe going through your garbage at night, and peering through your windows, just pay your alimony and play nice.

3. Don't hit people.

Unless they hit you first, usually over the head with some sort of blunt object, after which you wake up on the floor a few hours later with a mild headache which can be quickly remedied by three fingers of rye. Poured by a mysterious member of the opposite sex in a mesmerizing outfit.

4. Put things back where you found them.

And not in your pocket. Or an offshore bank account. Extension of rule number one (share everything). The only time this is allowed is when you are the PI and are re-appropriating stolen goods to help orphans. Or nuns.

5. Clean up your own mess.

And if you can't, hire a man (or woman) in a trench coat (or pencil skirt) to assist you.

**Conversely, PIs are often hired to identify those guilty of over-sharing, e.g. furtive embraces of a passionate nature with unknown partners.

6. Don't take things that aren't yours.

Yet another extension of number one. Did you take something that wasn't yours? Chances are the person it belongs to isn't going to like that much. And will hire a humorless man in a double-breasted suit (or woman in stylish outfit and two-tone shoes) to track you down. This can play havoc with your general equilibrium.

7. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

That's not what most lawyers will tell you, but it's not a bad idea, even if you don't mean it. If you're unsure how far to go, remember you can temper your apologies with the "If I offended anyone in any way ..." caveat. But also note, Easy Rawlins never apologizes for diddly.

8. Wash your hands before you eat.

No need to wash them before drinking bourbon, however. Especially out of the bottle. After you wake up on the floor.

9. Flush.

Not a lot of literary proof on this one, as most manuscripts have these kinds of details edited out. But flush, unless you live in California or another drought state. But only under certain conditions ("When it's yellow, let it mellow").

10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Try telling that to the one in ten who suffer from diabetes. When was the last time you saw Philip Marlow eat a damn cookie? Cookies don't go with bourbon either. Lucky Strikes do. If you shake them out of the pack and pull them out with your lips. Two at a time if a member of the opposite sex is present. Bonus points for post-coital.

11. Live a balanced life.

Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Hopefully not all at the same time. And not with your secretary, after hours. Or else your spouse might hire a grim, lantern-jawed dick to make your life a living hell.

12. Take a nap every afternoon.

With your shoes up on the desk in your office in an alley overlooking a Chinese restaurant and/or dive bar. And a fedora down over your eyes, until a lady from Shanghai sashays in with a wad of cash and a gun in her "pocket-book."

13. When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Which makes you an even bigger target. Sam Spade don't need no stinkin' friends.

14. Be aware of wonder.

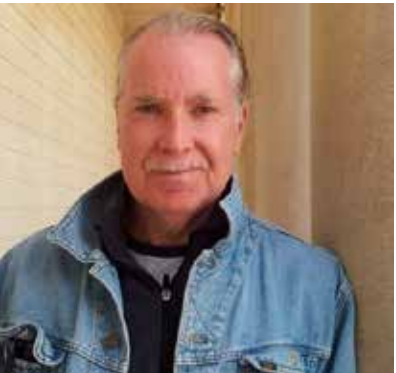
Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that. Wonder is good. You should wonder why a falcon statuette is being sought after by mysterious women, large, sinister guys with soft foreign accents, and little creepy guys who sound like Morocco Mole. Wonder why the Maltese Falcon is made of plaster. Wonder.

15. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.

Yeah, sweetheart. It's called The Big Sleep.

16. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word of all—LOOK.

As in look out. Behind you.



About the author

Born in the wilds of San Francisco, with its rich literary history and public transportation system teeming with characters suitable for crime novels, the stage was set for **Max Tomlinson** to become a mystery writer.

He is a *USA Today* bestselling author whose latest book—*Bad Scene*—is set in 1970s San Francisco, featuring Colleen Hayes, an ex-con searching for her lost daughter. You can read more at maxtomlinson.wordpress.com.



Photo credit: Andrew Whitton

Lisa Jewell
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Lisa Jewell

Lisa Jewell is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of nineteen novels, including *The Family Upstairs* and *Then She Was Gone*, as well as *Invisible Girl* and *Watching You*. Her novels have sold more than 5 million copies internationally, and her work has also been translated into twenty-eight languages.

Q. For your hit, *Invisible Girl*, you’ve talked before about how an unhappy guy at a children’s snowball fight inspired the story. Do you have any similar genesis story for *The Night She Disappeared*?

Lisa: There was a genesis for this book, but it didn’t pack quite the same memorable punch as the genesis of some of my previous books. I was listening to a fellow author discussing one of her early books at an event where we were sharing a panel. She said something about “boarding school” and I felt my mind go off on a tangent as I realised, quite suddenly and acutely, that I really wanted my next book to be set in a boarding school. As it happened, because I don’t plan and I let my books meander their way to the ending, the boarding school motif petered out as I wrote and it became much more about the village in which the school was located. Originally the “dig here” sign was going to uncover some bones, but when I got to the point of writing that scene, I realised I wasn’t sure if anyone had died yet! So, to leave myself more flexibility I randomly put an engagement ring in there and let that guide the story instead.

Q. Despite a level of success that puts you with few peers, you’ve spoken out about lack of confidence, especially around meeting expectations. With each successive storytelling triumph, do those expectations increase?

Lisa: I do think that having a solid run of books that have hit the spot with my readers, that have been well received and sold in good numbers, has rebuilt my confidence a lot. My publishers are happy, my readers are happy, and that definitely feeds into my psychology as I begin each new book. It doesn’t feel like so much of a fluke anymore, it doesn’t feel like it’s a streak of crazy good luck that could run out if I put one foot wrong. If anything, I’m finding now that I have to pull myself back from being too gung-ho about creating my novels, too much “oh, I don’t need to worry because whatever I do it always works out fine.” There’s a perfect balance between both states of mind, and I need to make sure I keep striking it.

Q. Your characters are often filled with moral ambiguity. What draws you to these kinds of characters?

Lisa: Twice in recent months I have come upon a person in real life who has utterly confounded me. My reaction to both people was to interrogate them, corner them, try to find out what made them tick, who they really were, what their back story was, what their true intentions might be. And I found myself thinking that this is what I’m drawn to when I’m writing characters. I like them to confound me, I like them to wrongfoot me. I like to unpeel them and keep finding things that surprise me. And I assume that my readers like this as well. Not all my characters are filled with moral ambiguity, obviously, but the ones that are, are the ones that bring my books to life and are certainly the ones I enjoy writing the most.

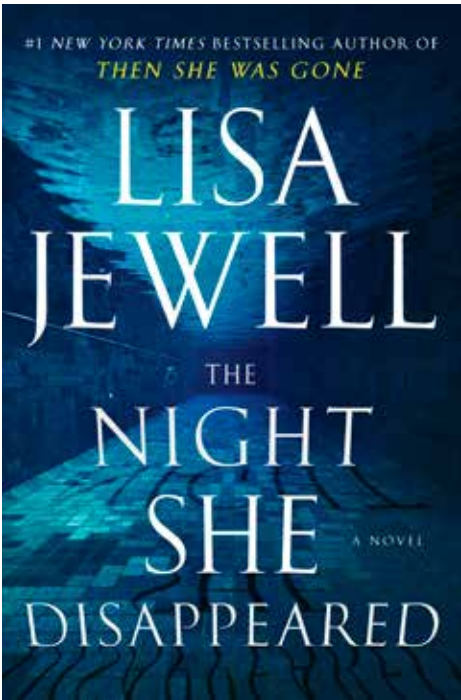
Q. You’ve previously mentioned your preference for blockbuster books over classics and obscure stories. What are some of your favorite titles of all time?

Lisa: Yes, I am very much drawn to the big, hyped up books; if everyone’s talking about it, I want to read it! And I’m rarely let down when I let hype lead my choices. But

I’ve also enjoyed a lot of niche and obscure books over the years. Some of my favourite books of all-time are books that nobody’s ever heard of. But of the “big books,” I’ve loved *Gone Girl* (Gillian Flynn), *The Girl on the Train* (Paula Hawkins), *You* (Caroline Kepnes), *I Let You Go* (Clare Mackintosh), and *The Woman in the Window* (AJ Finn). Of the less well-known books, my favourites include *The Stopped Heart* by Julie Myerson, *Alys Always* by Harriet Lane and *The Hidden Girl* by Louise Millar. The book that I think tipped me from writing romance and family drama into writing darker thrillers was *After You’d Gone* by Maggie O’Farrell, and the best book I’ve read in 2021, by far, was *The Last Thing To Burn* by Will Dean.

Q. What are you most excited for this year?

Lisa: I’m really excited to read *Where The Truth Lies* by Anna Bailey, a story about a missing girl in a small town, which sounds pretty much like my favorite premise for a book. I’m also looking forward to *Rock, Paper, Scissors* by the amazing Alice Feiney, *Apples Never Fall* by Liane Moriarty and the new Sally Rooney novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You?*



Lisa Jewell’s latest: *The Night She Disappeared*

2017: 19-year-old Tallulah is going out on a date, leaving her baby with her mother, Kim.

Kim watches her daughter leave and, as late evening turns into night, which turns into early morning, she waits for her return. And waits.

The next morning, Kim phones Tallulah’s friends who tell her that Tallulah was last seen heading to a party at a house in the nearby woods called Dark Place.

She never returns.

Mexican Thrillers

WHY MEXICO IS SUCH A THRILLING SETTING

From ghost legends to ancient aliens, vibrant cities to breathtaking landscapes, Mexico is rich in boths culture and natural enviornment. And that makes for exceptional storytelling.

BY MICHAEL KROZER

Why is Mexico a perfect setting for the mystery, suspense, and thriller genres? We must begin by exploring what defines Mexico. It's a country that has experienced conflict, sociological dislocations, and fusions with a history measurable in millennia. It has the potential for these genres to be ironed into its fabric, culture, and people, especially when it comes to its myths and legends, which provide a trove of material.

Take the Day of the Dead celebration, for example, which is incorporated into the Aztec calendar. It began 2,500 to 3,000 years ago as a ritual celebrating the deaths of ancestors. The month-long celebration is dedicated to a god named "Lady of the Dead," or Catrina. Descendants visit cemeteries to commune with departed souls and use earthly possessions to encourage visitations.

Just take this one cultural tradition. Could a mystery or thriller novel be spun from it? Absolutely.

"It isn't right," John hissed angrily to his buddies at the bar. "Rick is such an obnoxious, conceited bastard! Everything goes his way and he rubs his success in our faces. How does he always make the right moves? It's like he has all the answers. Starting tonight, I'm gonna find out why! I don't care if people gossip that he's some sort of spirit cultist nut job who sleeps in cemeteries. I think he started that rumor just to scare us off."

Morbid ghost legends are also alive and well in Mexico. "La Llorona" or the "Weeping Woman" is about a woman who killed her children to attract the love of a man and subsequently killed herself after he rejected her. She was doomed to wander the earth for eternity searching for her

children. The details of the tale vary, which open up many literary opportunities involving ghosts or regular, corporeal folks who tread that horrific path.

Or take the hitchhiker ghost legend. On a given day each year, a spirit appears as a beautiful woman and gives her address to the driver. Later, when he goes to find her, he's informed that she's dead. Sounds like a great pitch for a novel, doesn't it? Why him? Why her? Why there? Does she have a message that will affect his life? What does the person at the address really know of the ghost and her history? The Aztecs and Mayans also have volumes of spirit beliefs that could easily be modernized.

While on the topic of ancient beliefs, myths, and traditions, there is also the conversation and controversy about alien visitations depicted on artifacts found in Teotihuacán (0-500 AD) and Chichén Itzá (600-1200 AD). Surrounded by the ruins, it's easy to imagine outer-worldly goings on. Satellite scans have recently discovered the enormity of the city of Angamuco, which was built by the Purépecha around 900 AD. It remains buried under the canopy of the Mexican jungle and a thousand years' worth of growth. Ancient hieroglyphs and other writings may suggest extra-terrestrial intervention stories worthy of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg.

It doesn't matter that these original stories are thousands of years old. In fact, this makes the whole idea of them even more intriguing. Thriller and mystery fans can certainly rejoice at this potential for both ancient and modern-day adaptations. The wonders and depth of Mexican myth never cease to amaze.

Moving into the twenty-first century, for better or worse, thriller and crime stories set in Mexico are popular. Some of these have to do with cartels and crime in general. There is



also migration from Central America and, as with any mass migration of people, mysteries are waiting to be reimagined.

Sand castle kingdoms abound in Mexico. Some of these cities and towns are in the mountains. Some are in the desert or near the ocean. Some are tourist oriented, while others are definitely not. In the latter, it's still possible to find chicken buses, careening phantom-like along potholed and dusty streets, especially at night. It would be fun to craft a mystery around one set in the predawn glow, Christmas lights twinkling on the grill, no passengers.

"I was the first one on," John said quietly. The campfire crackled and sparked as he began recounting the experience that led him into a world that challenged all the science he knew. "The driver, his face, dark, long and wrinkled, merely nodded as I dropped my peso into the cardboard box. Then he looked at me. What really struck me were his eyes. The sharp eyes of a younger man who missed nothing."

For many story creators, the vibe and physical characteristics of a location play heavily into what ultimately ends on the page or screen. Today, one can virtually "travel" to anywhere, say, by watching a live cam of a market square in a city. Mexico abounds with them. But nothing beats actually being there and sitting at a café for hours with notebook or computer, just letting the totality sink in. What does

the energy in the square feel like—calm, expectant, chaotic? How does the water look as it streams onto and off the statuary of the central fountain? What are people doing at the fountain? What mood is cast from the sun and shadow at that time of day? What is the ambient sound?

"Carlos hesitates, knowing he'll only have moments after wading into the fountain pool before the police descend upon him. But there it was, so close. A dark blue satchel submerged in two feet of shimmering water just below the feet of Saint Vincent. Exactly where her note said it would be. 'Happy to lend a hand,' it said. Heart pounding, he glanced at the tour group gathering near him and then at the police."

Mexico has many such great and varied cities, each a microcosm of humanity that could provide the creative spark and layers of reality needed for a great story: Mexico City, population around 9 million, a cosmopolitan free for all. Guadalajara, population around 2 million, a more colonial flair. Guanajuato, population around 200,000, mining, narrow streets, and tunnels. Oaxaca, population around 350,000, rough terrain, renowned culinary scene. Cozumel, a small island with around 85,000 people, everything ocean. Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco, population 390,000 and 690,000 respectively. Ocean front, dining, night life, expats,

.....

It is really a complex stew where worlds collide—culture, art, sophistication, depravity, crime, peace, fulfillment, humor, love, and sadness all simmering together in a big paella.

and high energy. Of course, the available cast of villains, outcasts, opportunists, adventurers, victims, and heroes is legion.

What do modern writers and film producers have to say about finding inspiration in Mexico? First, mysteries and thrillers tend to slant toward the dark side of narrative. Oh, let's just say it, they bathe in the dark side! I certainly don't want to portray Mexico this way because it is really a complex stew where worlds collide—culture, art, sophistication, depravity, crime, peace, fulfillment, humor, love, and sadness all simmering together in a big paella. It has been conveyed to me by writers and residents that a strong sense of humorous irony is necessary to survive and flourish here, as well as a watchful eye.

Maybe the origin of the Virgin of Guadeloupe sums up this attitude perfectly. Urban legend has it that the Spanish created the detailed account following their conquest in order to appease the indigenous population. The short story is that the Virgin Mary first spoke to Juan Diego on the morning of December 9, 1531. She asked that a church be erected in her honor at that place (Villa de Guadeloupe). On December 26, the first miracle was performed after a native was accidentally shot through the neck by a stray arrow during a performance in honor of the Virgin (dark and ironic humor for sure). Brought before the Virgin's image, the arrow was removed and he recovered. In the 1800s, Spaniards born there came to believe the Virgin of Guadeloupe legitimized their indigenous Mexican origins

and justified their armed rebellion against Spain. An explosive outcome unforeseen in 1531 and typically Mexican.

Here are some Mexican writers you might want to look up: Elmer Mendoza, Paco Igando Taibo II, and Jose Salvador Ruiz. They all write from the environment surrounding them and incorporate what inspires into their stories. Carmen Amato is another, among many, who is American and sets her novels in Mexico. Paul Theroux's *On the Plain of Snakes* is a great source for a behind-the-scenes look at Mexico. One can take from his writings that Mexico is kaleidoscopic, composed of so many fragments that it defies the sweeping definition. Perhaps this is the sweeping definition.

In conclusion, when reading novels set in Mexico, see if you can find these attributes buried between the lines or right on the surface: fragile society, ironic humor about death and life, absence of law, absence of government, the hustle, the struggle to survive, generosity of spirit, loyalty, a magical land, beautiful and dark contrast and paradox, deep cultural linkages, chaos, benevolence, religion, revenge, and activism. And the abundant occurrence of things that should work but don't.

So why is Mexico a perfect setting for the mystery and thriller genres? Anything can happen there, and usually does.

Special acknowledgement: Abraham Castillo Flores, Head of Programming at Morbido Fest, Mexico City

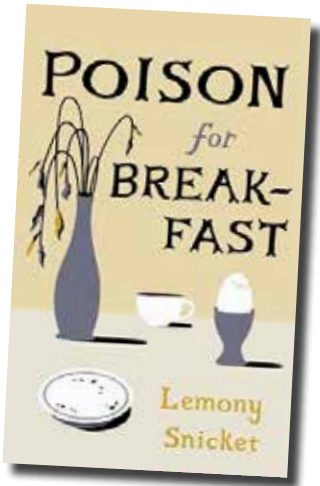


About the author

Michael Krozer is a freelance writer, novelist, and filmmaker. He travels widely and blends the locations and people he encounters into narratives that celebrate and explore the human condition. His latest novels are *87 Hours in Mexico*, which follows the fateful choices made by an American rock band, and *Inversion 1 – Looking Through Mirrors*, about a courageous woman determined to conquer her fear after having lost everything. Both are available through Amazon.



Lemony Snicket
Bestselling author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*
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This true story—as true as Lemony Snicket himself—begins with a puzzling note under his door: You had poison for breakfast. Following a winding trail of clues to solve the mystery of his own demise, Snicket takes us on a thought-provoking tour of his predilections: the proper way to prepare an egg, a perplexing idea called “tzimtzum,” the sublime pleasure of swimming in open water, and much else.

Lemony Snicket

Due to a series of unfortunate events, Lemony Snicket won’t be able to join us today. Instead, Daniel Handler will be filling in. Apologies. Very unforeseeable.

Lemony Snicket had an unusual education and a perplexing youth and now endures a despondent adulthood. His previous published works include the thirteen volumes in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *The Composer is Dead*, and *13 Words*. His latest is *Poison for Breakfast*.

Q. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is a take on the gothic novel, and *All The Wrong Questions* is a take on the noir genre. What is *Poison for Breakfast*?

Daniel: Digressive nonfiction murder mystery? Investigative philosophical lyric essay? I’m not sure what you would call it if *The Anatomy of Melancholy* had been penned instead by Agatha Christie, but my inspiration was noticing my young son’s hunger for nonfiction, which is often disappointing in children’s literature.

Q. You’ve said elsewhere that you’re more interested in stories that ask questions than try to provide answers. What kinds of questions does *Poison for Breakfast* ask?

Daniel: Why is the night more interesting than the day? Are all stories the same? Is it possible to go someplace? Must every Cinderella have a midnight? Is there any such thing as reliable information? Is there God? Why do people swim? Why have we allowed so many people to starve for so long? What is loneliness? Is it possible to translate something? Do you always know what you are thinking? How should we behave knowing we are going to die? What is the best way to prepare eggs?

Q. Famously, your pseudonym came from a split-second lie to keep your name off a mailing list. Do you ever wonder what might have happened if you’d chosen a different name?

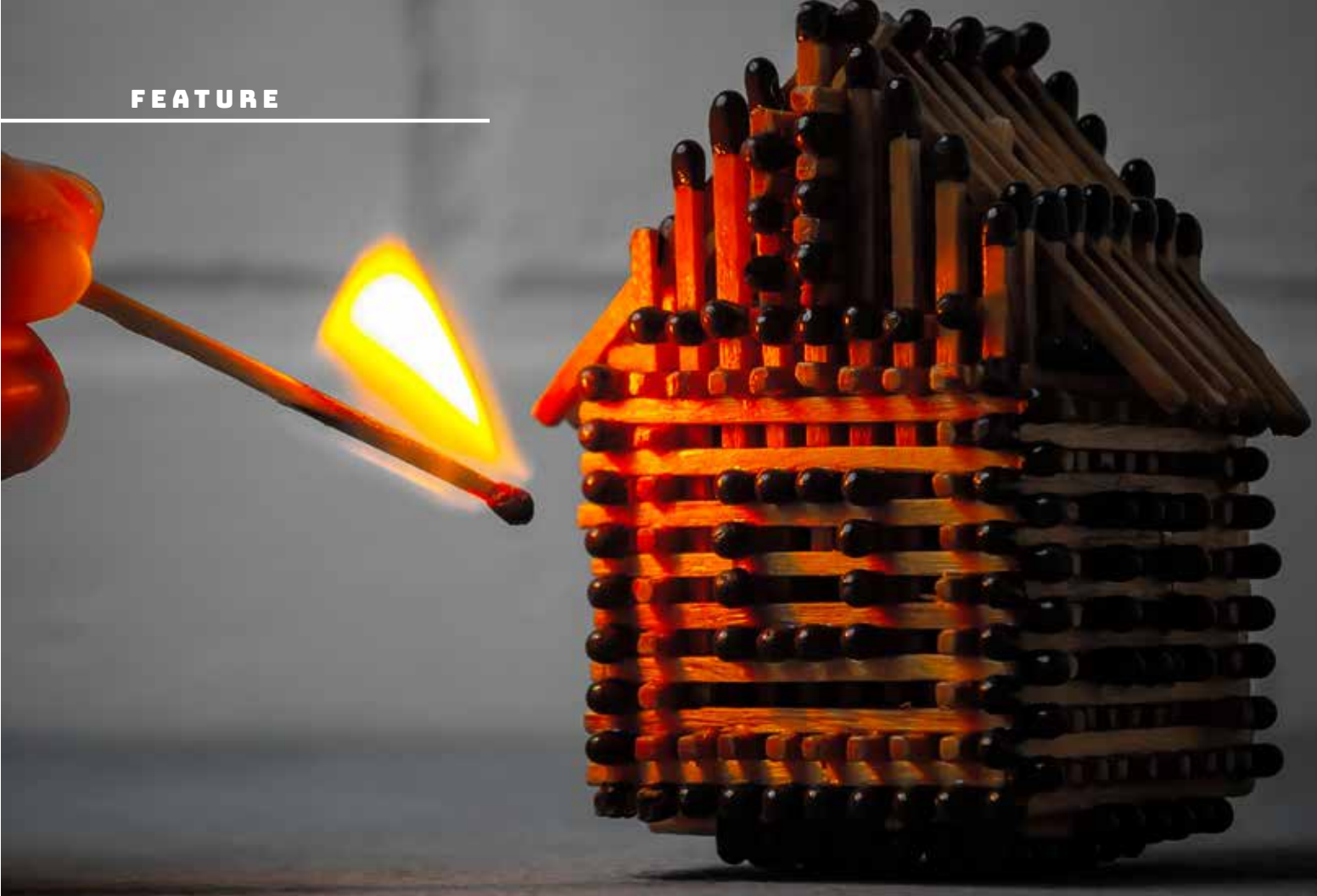
Daniel: I wonder, or at least try to wonder, about such things almost all of the time—not just about various professional choices, but about the endless vicissitudes of ordinary life. I try to stand in the knowledge that being bewildered is the true way of experiencing the world.

Q. What do you read?

Daniel: I am buying Peter Cameron’s novel *What Happens at Night* for everyone. If they don’t like it, I look at them funny.

Q. What are you working on now?

Daniel: The pandemic delayed the appearance of Mr. Snicket on the stage. I am now working hard trying to rectify that.



ARSON
in Mysteries
and Thrillers

BY LINDSEY LAMAR

Avid thriller readers are used to the deaths, the disappearances, the jealous spouses hiding behind affectionate masks. Just daily routine in any suspense-junkie’s life. But what’s an area that can really imply a wicked and emotional twist into typical mystery?

Arson.

Underrated and underused, pyromaniacs and arsonists can be some of the most interesting and intense characters a reader can meet.

THE KNOWN ARSONIST

So, how’s it done? (The writing, the arson, maybe both.) There are two strategies in creating a flame-throwing story. The first being the reader knows the arsonist is an arsonist from chapter one. With this approach, arson becomes a part of the character rather than the centerpiece of the story. It’s typically used as a contour to the main, broader plot and a quirky, but addictive trait that differentiates the suspense of “getting caught” rather than “catching the criminal.” Revealing the arsonist before revealing the crime leaves more room in a narrative to focus on themes of mental disorder and burdened childhoods throughout a character arc.



**THE ARSONIST IN
A WHODUNNIT**

The second strategy is the most common: the traditional whodunnit plot. This is seen in the popular novel and movie *Little Fires Everywhere*. This strategy historically creates suspense in a way that introduces readers to the crime of arson before learning the face of the criminal. Writers who use this strategy are almost always expert Easter-egg planters, leaving their reader’s jaw on the floor after the novel ends. Both approaches have pros and cons, but can add a compelling twist to a conventional story.

THE MOTIVE OF THE ARSONIST

The motives in an arson plot are extremely delicate. How it’s done says a lot about a character and their motive. An arson-murder could show signs of a more intense, devious character, while an arson with no death count is even more interesting, as the emotion behind the motive becomes extremely enticing and confusing. Characters partaking in pyromaniac activities have to hold unique character arcs that evolve towards secrecy, skepticism, and calculation.

It’s important to point out that pyromaniacs are not always arsonists and arsonists not always pyromaniacs. An arsonist can still be an arsonist without necessarily enjoying the act they are committing. To fall under the pyro bucket, the character must feel intense gratification and satisfaction from the act of burning everyday things. These characters are compelling to read and often must be ridden with a variety of mental disorders.

Reading about pyromaniacs can be very attention-grabbing to readers when well-researched. An author can show them deeply from a first-person perspective, or they can be tainted in a mysterious third-person. Regardless, pyros are often wicked smart while simultaneously just plain wicked. Combining these two concepts brings us into a corner of the literary world that is hard to resist getting to know. Meanwhile, an arsonist could fall under this bucket or merely fall into the crowd of an everyday, unsuspected character. Since thriller and suspense novels often have a mystery at their centerfold, many popular arson titles leave the deep emotional mind of a pyro character behind to intensify the element of surprise at the end of a novel.

**THE PERSPECTIVE OF
THE ARSONIST**

Arson can be both a chemical and physical act, so the elements surrounding a fire must be carefully calculated to be believable. Authors have to decide the perspective the arson might unfold from. For example, if a childhood home was burnt down, the narrator can swing into a huge range of possibilities. A person who grew up in the childhood home is going to produce a burdensome emotional response to the crime scene, sifting through the ashes of nostalgia and heartbreak.

This lens can instantly spin an arson into a deeply personable, devastating event. The writer also would not need to weigh down the story with copious amounts of expert-lingo from this point of view. However, told from a detective or authority perspective, an arson will likely read much more emotionally detached. And detached does not mean boring. In fact, it means quite the opposite. Novels told from a credible authority often get the highest praise for creating a world that is accurately colored and believable to a fault. So believable that readers often don’t see the culprit even when right under their nose.

Approaches like this must be colored with ample research and the corresponding lingo. For example: what accelerants were used to start the fire, what temperature would produce the results that lay in the crime scene, what clues could be left behind, and even just the inter-workings

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Pyromaniacs can be very attention-grabbing when well-researched. Pyros are often wicked smart while simultaneously just plain wicked.

standard police procedure. If an expert-detective were to read your depiction, they should find minor to no issues. It’s hard work, but proves rewarding.

Lisa Gardner is an expert with this lens and creates fiction true-crime-like stories that land her in the bestseller bucket nearly every novel. Readers that struggle with minor plot holes or getting all the facts typically have a deeper resonance with this arson-lens while emotionally-provoked poetic readers might enjoy the former.

Arson plots leave a mansion of room for twisty, dark stories. The lack of evidence that comes with fire-ridden scenes opens up space for a writer to be as creative as they want to be and threads thriller readers into a state of probable uncertainty. And while the danger is left in the story, the author’s search history will be the most incriminating evidence of all. Let’s hope the FBI knows we’re just authors.



About the author

Lindsey Lamar is a thriller writer from Austin, Texas. She prides herself of dark twists and unreliable narrators. Her debut thriller novel, *Better Off Guilty*, released in April 2021.



Megan Abbott
Edgar Award-winning novelist and television showrunner and executive producer
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Megan Abbott

Megan Abbott is the Edgar-winning author of the novels *Die a Little*, *Queenpin*, *The Song Is You*, *Bury Me Deep*, *The End of Everything*, *Dare Me*, *The Fever*, *You Will Know Me*, and *Give Me Your Hand*.

Abbott is co-showrunner, writer, and executive producer of *Dare Me*, the TV show adapted from her novel. She was also a staff writer on HBO’s *The Deuce*.

Q. *The Turnout* hit shelves in August—about a suspicious accident at a ballet studio; a story of family, femininity, and façade. What inspired the story? Given your expertise at research, how did you go about putting the pieces together?

Megan: I’d long wanted to write something set in a ballet school. As a seven- or eight-year-old, I started taking ballet at a studio run by two sisters. We were all obsessed with them. They seemed to encompass both all the power and contradictions of womanhood. So elegant and remote and perfect, and behind that scrim all the work and sacrifice and discipline. So, I started reading about ballet obsessively, diving into everything I could to make it feel real. At the same time, I wanted to write something about a family, and about women—the way women can be the harshest judges of other women, particularly when it comes to romantic and/or sexual choices. So that all merged into *The Turnout*, this tale of two sisters who run a ballet studio and are locked in this intricate, volatile dance with each other.

Q. Your interest in noir seems to be a driving force, from your graduate thesis, to early gangster movie influences, through to your acclaimed (Edgar Award-winning!) work. What changes are you seeing in the genre? How are women writers influencing noir? Where does it go from here?

Megan: Like any genre, it’s always in flux and reflects the changes in the culture and that’s its greatest strength. There have always been brilliant women writers of noir going back to Dorothy B. Hughes, and brilliant writers of color, going back to Chester Himes. But now it feels particularly exhilarating, and I think one of the biggest changes is the move away from the genre staple of “one lone man” (who’s historically white, cisgender, straight) taking on (or trying to take on) the system. Which was always a fantasy and a destructive one. What I see now in crime fiction is an increasingly complex, critical view of systems, of law enforcement, of the criminal justice system, of the way we talk about crime and its victims and survivors. Not to mention a bigger push in publishing to diversify, and the emergence of groups like Crime Writers of Color. More of all that, please.

Q. Who are some of your favorite writers in mystery or noir? What have you read lately?

Megan: So many, too many to name and not leave someone important out! But to shout out some of my recent favorites: Laura Lippman’s *Dream Girl*, Alison Gaylin’s upcoming *The Collective*, Willy Vlautin’s *The Night Always Comes*. And I never miss a book by Steph Cha, Alafair Burke, Attica Locke. Right now, I’m reading Paula Hawkins’s upcoming *Slow Fire Burning* and can’t put it down. And I can’t wait for Ace Atkins’s *The Heathens*, S.A. Cosby’s *Razorblade Tears* and William Boyle’s *Shoot the Moonlight Out*, all pre-ordered.

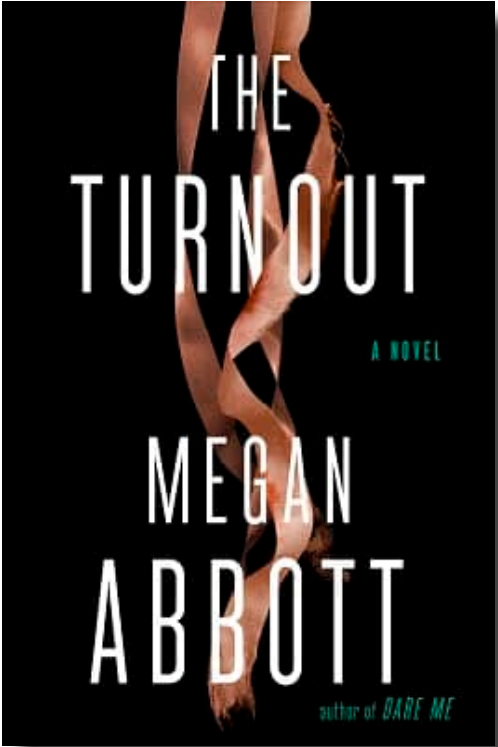
Q. On top of everything else, you’re also a television screenwriter and producer. What was your entry into that space? What is the latest on *Dare Me* or other newer projects, like *The Turnout*?

Megan: I guess it’s been nearly ten years now, but it began when I was attached to write the feature screenplay

for *Dare Me*, which eventually become a series and my first showrunning experience. It was, creatively, one of the most rewarding experiences of my life and I fell in love with the collaborative energy. Right now, I’m developing *The Turnout* as a limited series and also working with George Pelecanos on a series for HBO and with Scott Frank on a feature script, so it’s been really exciting to work with writers I admire so greatly.

Q. What are you writing now?

Megan: Lots of scripts, alas, but I’ve been excited to return to novel-writing recently. I have a new manuscript in the works. Early days, but I’m crossing my fingers.



Megan Abbott’s latest: *The Turnout*

Ballet flows through their veins. Dara and Marie Durant were dancers since birth, with their long necks and matching buns and pink tights, homeschooled and trained by their mother. Decades later the Durant School of Dance is theirs. The two sisters, together with Charlie, Dara’s husband and once their mother’s prize student, inherited the school after their parents died in a tragic accident nearly a dozen years ago. Marie, warm and soft, teaches the younger students; Dara, with her precision, trains the older ones; and Charlie, back broken after years of injuries, rules over the back office. Circling around each other, the three have perfected a dance, six days a week, that keeps the studio thriving. But when a suspicious accident occurs, just at the onset of the school’s annual performance of *The Nutcracker*, a season of competition, anxiety, and exhilaration, an interloper arrives and threatens the delicate balance of everything they’ve worked for.

Taut and unnerving, *The Turnout* is Megan Abbott at the height of her game. With uncanny insight and hypnotic writing, it is a sharp and strange dissection of family ties and sexuality, femininity and power, and a tale that is both alarming and irresistible.

In Search of the Great FINANCIAL THRILLER

Medical and legal thrillers are smash hits in the genre. So when will financial thrillers have their bull run?

BY CHRIS COFFMAN

For my money, the greatest book on the financial world written so far is *Barbarians at the Gate* by Bryan Burrough and John Helyar, published in 1989.

Connie Bruck's *The Predator's Ball* in 1988 was also pretty good, but as usual with books and movies in this genre it was long on champagne and caviar (a terrible combination) and cocaine and hookers (the worst imaginable combination!), and short on explaining Michael Milken's truly important and revolutionary accomplishments in the financial markets and the American economy of the 1980s.

Michael Lewis's *The Big Short*, published in 2010, and the movie made from it are both excellent. Not surprisingly, Lewis is an insider, or a former insider, who made his debut in the early 1980s with *Liar's Poker*. This was an authentic and outstanding memoir of his time as a junior-burger trainee at Salomon Brothers when they were the biggest, baddest bond-trading house in the world, rivaled only by Lehman Brothers.

Notice these are all non-fiction books. So where are the truly great fictional financial thrillers?

The puzzle is especially frustrating when we reflect on how many great legal thrillers, medical thrillers, and espionage thrillers have been written. Detective novels long ago reached nearly the highest levels of literature in the hands of Edgar Allan Poe, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and many other great writers who nailed these classic mystery and suspense stories.

Could it be that the lack of great financial thrillers is because banking and finance are so boring? Really? Every aspect of our lives is influenced in multiple ways by the financial markets. Surely there are some thrills to be found in such pervasive, unchecked power.

Or could it be because banking and finance are so detailed and technical—just too hard for readers to slog through and understand? By that logic, legal and medical thrillers would suffer the same fate. It's true that finance, trading, and investment banking are detailed disciplines, but so are other subjects that have produced the great thrillers we enjoy.



One clue as to why there are so few great financial thrillers might be in films like Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987), which stars Michael Douglas as the infamous Gordon Gekko, and Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). These movies purport to reveal the dirty, thrilling secrets of investment banking, but actually depict retail brokers, who happen to be the class of financial players most familiar to readers and film goers. Retail brokers don’t do the deals that create financial products and services. They’re at the end of value chain. They just “stuff the stuffees.”

The truth is financial markets are vast, mysterious, secret factories, like a trillion-dollar version of Willy Wonka’s chocolate plant. Highlighting retail brokers is like focusing on the candy store owners who sell you a bar of chocolate. But chocolate is wholesome and tastes good—the same cannot be said for all the products and services produced in the financial markets.

That’s where the great untold thrillers lurk.

INFORMATION IS VALUABLE

The movie *Wall Street* owed its success to Gekko’s motto “Greed is good,” which was a lucky gimmick that sold lots of movie tickets. The real motto of financial markets isn’t this, although it’s true that markets are shaped by fear and greed. The actual motto is “Tell me something I don’t know.” If you can’t do that, you’re worthless.

The second (related) motto is “Information is worth what it costs.” Small investors who read the *Wall Street Journal* or the business section of the *New York Times* for a few dollars a week are getting information that is worth exactly what it costs. Investment bankers and their clients spend millions of dollars gathering the information necessary to make a

decision about their deals.

First-class financial titles like *Barbarians at the Gate* and *The Big Short* do take you inside the factory, but this doesn’t happen very often. Why? The answer is the difference between money and capital. Most people live their entire lives dealing only, or mostly, with money. When they have something to do with capital, they often don’t even recognize it.

Everyone has contact with money and some knowledge of its qualities. By contrast, capital and its ways are a closely guarded secret. The entrance to the trillion-dollar factory is locked tight and guarded, like a bank vault or the imperial fortress of a great emperor, and only a tiny elite are ever admitted. And they don’t talk.

Great financial thrillers are about capital.

CAPITAL IS DANGEROUS

What is capital? The first thing to understand is that the nature of money changes qualitatively as its scale increases quantitatively. After it accumulates above the amounts required to sustain daily life, money evolves and acquires special powers.

Money becomes capital.

Capital, even in small amounts, begins to stratify into layers, and each layer has subtly different characteristics, the way the atmosphere cools and thins as its altitude increases.

Capital in the enormous amounts that energize the global economy is like the earth’s atmosphere at the highest altitudes—thin, light, arid—offering little nourishment. The upper strata of capital swirls restlessly, in continual stiff breezes that desiccate and freeze. This strata of capital is disembodied, sterile, and almost valueless in itself.

Just as climate change science has taught us that human activity can influence the atmosphere and put at risk the future of life on earth, the mechanisms for generating and allocating capital can also release malignant forces with the potential to extinguish human society. And unlike greenhouse gases, which have taken centuries to accumulate, capital moves as fast as thought. Colliding with vast amounts of ethereal capital is like meeting one’s destiny, either personally, as a nation, or as our human race.

THE ISSUE OF SCALE

Readers instinctively know when the story they’re reading is set in the realm of money. Lots of cash being carried around in briefcases and trucks. A million dollars or two is the realm of drug dealers and corrupt politicians and CIA bribes, but it doesn’t ring true as the prize in a financial thriller.

The problem for a writer is that the kinds of numbers that really portray the realm of capital: funds transfers of ten million dollars, or fifty million, or a billion dollars, and faraway off-shore banking centers immune from the IRS (which don’t actually exist anymore, by the way), all sound abstract and pointless. How does an author create emotional tension when his characters are apex predators who inhabit the ecology of capital, where the numbers are so big they all blur into cascading screenfuls of statistics and leave readers confused and emotionally numb?

The answer is portraying and dramatizing the powerful connections between the world of capital and the ordinary world of money in which the rest of the human race lives, and to show how the vicious competition inside the secret realm of capital affects the lives of the entire human race.

Capital is social energy. Most people have little opportunity to contribute to it, and therefore they live in a daily state of lack and anxiety, hoping to earn a little more money than their expenses. A properly functioning financial system circulates capital back into society and the economy where most people live, just as warm air rises to high altitudes, cools and settles, then returns to lower altitudes as breezes and rain to cool and water the earth. In this abundance,

everybody and everything thrives. There’s sufficient money for everyone to prosper, not just survive.

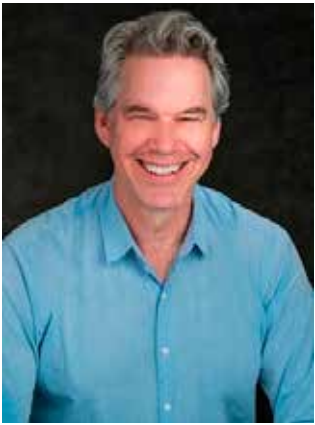
Today, the global financial system isn’t functioning properly. It’s possible that today’s economic climate change is toxifying the global economy faster than greenhouse gases are suffocating the environment. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, apartments in New York and London are being bought and sold by those with access to the upper strata of capital for one hundred million dollars, while hundreds of millions of average people in developed countries are unable to raise five hundred dollars cash in an emergency. In the last few months, the disruptions in the upper strata of capital have begun to flow down into the earthly realm of money where most people live: the price of lumber has increased 280 percent, the price of steel is up 75 percent, and gasoline is up 22.5 percent

WHO ARE THE HEROES IN THE FINANCIAL SYSTEM?

Barbarians at the Gate showed how a few handfuls of players generated a huge merger that resulted in the loss of jobs for tens of thousands of workers and reduced the incomes of thousands of farmers. *The Big Short* showed how a largely anonymous cadre of greedy, reckless traders and investment bankers wrecked the lives of millions of people who were lured into shaky investments in mortgage-backed securities, or were tempted to buy houses they couldn’t actually afford—and later suffered foreclosure. That’s what authentic financial thrillers do.

The true heroes of our global economy are the few who resist the selfish opportunities so abundant in the realm of capital, who refuse to cut corners, who strive to be ethical, who decline to proceed with myriad irrational deals that harm society and the economy but earn large profits and bonuses. They’re a dwindling number, and depicting their choices and dilemmas and temptations would produce the heart of a great financial thriller.

The truth is there’s a great opportunity out there: today’s financial markets are the stuff of which, not dreams, but nightmares—and great financial thrillers—are made.



About the author

Chris Coffman worked for decades in Europe, the UK, the United States, Latin America, Asia, and Australia as an investment banker and investor before founding a highly-awarded wine company in Australia. Chris attended Columbia University before beginning his career at Manufacturers Hanover Trust, now J.P. Morgan in New York.

He is the author of the financial thriller *Crisis Deluxe*, and he and Eric Knight produce the podcast “The Recovering Investment Banker” at simplecast.com.



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Stephen Graham Jones

Stephen Graham Jones is the *New York Times* best-selling author of twenty-five or thirty books. He really likes werewolves and slashers. Favorite novels change daily, but *Valis* and *Love Medicine* and *Lonesome Dove* and *It* and *The Things They Carried* are all usually up there somewhere. Stephen lives in Boulder, Colorado. It's a big change from the West Texas he grew up in. He's married with a couple kids, and probably one too many trucks.

Q. *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* is horror at its best. On the surface, an enthralling slasher story. Levels deeper, a story about hometown, identity, change. What inspired it?

Stephen: My hometown usually comes up as “Midland, Texas,” but that’s just because where I actually grew up isn’t on the map. It’s between Midland and Stanton, and I spent more time in Stanton, probably, which, like Proofrock, is about three thousand people and feels a lot like 1962 never stopped happening. So, you’re right, *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* is a lot about small-town life, and living, and how everybody knows everybody. Often in the slasher, when the setting is a small town, then the protagonist will be the new kid, just stumbling into this cycle of violence.

With *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, I wanted that same outsider status, but I also wanted to focus it through someone with insider knowledge. Enter Jade Daniels, social outcast, life-long resident, and hardcore slasher aficionado. Slashers are how she makes sense of her world, and she’s been praying to Carpenter and Craven to please send her a Jason, a Michael, a Freddy, as she’s got some work for them to get done—and I guess that’s one place where *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* starts, for me, inception-wise: How do you deal with your most fervent wishes suddenly coming true around you? Do you wish you could reel that last wish back in, maybe? Slashers are fun to watch and read, I mean, but ... trying to live through one? It’s a brutal, violent cycle, and feels a lot different from the center than it does from the outside.

Q. How does *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* not just exist at the top of the genre, but also dive deeper as a meta-exploration of the genre?

Stephen: You know how, for a long time, people in zombie stories had never seen *Night of the Living Dead*? Or, it’s not that they just hadn’t seen it, it’s that it doesn’t seem to exist in their world. They don’t say “zombie” when they see the dead walking around, I mean. It was that way for a long time, but then storytellers figured out that it was scarier if these characters were actually from our world, where zombie movies have proliferated. It’s the same with the slasher. *Scream* really popularized these teens at the center of things being conversant in slasher conventions and tropes, which made it feel a lot more like Ghostface could, some Friday night, call us. But knowing the genre you’re in doesn’t necessarily insulate you from that genre, as Jade, the protagonist

of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, has to learn. It’s like, standing out on the interstate, you might know the make, model, and history of the truck bearing down on you, but that’s not knowledge that’s going to keep that truck from hitting you. It just allows you to narrate it as it’s happening. Jade doesn’t make the rules, she just happens to know them all—and she thinks that’s going to keep her safe. But, Randy, the know-it-all from *Scream*, ends up getting it in *Scream 2*, doesn’t he? That truck’s going to hit you whether you see it coming or not.

Q. What do you read, both within and outside of horror? How does what you read impact your writing voice?

Stephen: I read all the horror I can, of course, and have been since ... since forever, feels like. Outside of horror, I read everything else: science fiction, essays, paleoanthropology, on and on. Walking through other fields, burrs stick to your pants legs, and then when you come back to your home field—horror, for me—those burrs fall off like they’re designed to do, become the seeds they were all along, and grow up into these strange and unexpected plants. Specifically talking *My Heart Is a Chainsaw*, I think it comes in part from Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, which I read a lot in the nineties. I was smitten with the delivery method that book uses and thought it was something I could port out, use for horror. The first drafts of *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* were written with that same delivery method—“we,” not “I”—and I still feel remnants of that alien DNA when I look at certain passages.

Q. Your writing is famous for eliciting visceral, honest reactions from readers that puts you at the peak of horror authors. What drives you to write this way? Could you jolt your readership as well if you wrote in another genre?

Stephen: I would definitely try to jolt them that same way, yeah. And, I know it’s possible because I’ve seen it done. There’s a narrative escalation in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, say, that’s as sharp and visceral a turn as anything you’ll see in horror, there’s some developments in D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* that make you shudder, and there’s some dread in Louise Erdrich’s work that’s tacky and uncomfortable and

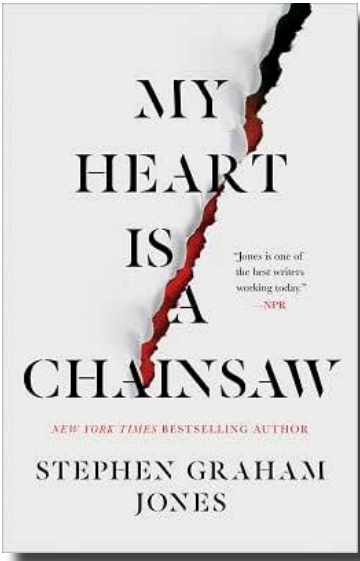
wrong and wonderful—that’s perfect, I’m saying. I’d hope that, with enough work, and if denied eviscerations and decapitations and the like, I could stage something similar. The ideal is always that you want the reader to drop the book in shock, right? Whatever genre you’re working in. And, yeah, maybe they pick it back up, hold it close for years afterward, but if you can shock them initially, and in a medium—prose fiction—where they’re actually the ones controlling the pace, the page-turns, then ... that’s when you’re cooking with fire, I’d say.

Q. *The Only Good Indians* is probably your best-known hit. How does *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* build off the success of that story?

Stephen: *The Only Good Indians* is a slasher through and through. Four guys commit a prank, and, years later, a spirit of vengeance comes to rebalance the scales of justice, violently. So, what *The Only Good Indians* uses as a scaffolding, a structure, a dynamic, *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* makes overt, via Jade Daniels being clued in to the dynamic unreeling around her and trying to loop her in. But they’re both slashers at heart, and by the masks they wear, the wreckage they leave behind. Balancing those scales of justice is never pretty, I mean. It feels good in intention, it feels pure and righteous, but, the morning after ... things aren’t so pretty. However, seeing that sunrise, always, is a final girl. She’s stood up to her bullies, she’s been reborn in blood, she’s figured out who she is and how to live—she’s a model for us all. Final girls tell us how to survive, they chart out the price of that survival for us, and they show us that there’s hope, that there’s a light way down at the end of the tunnel, if only we’re willing to fight through to it.

Q. What are you working on now?

Stephen: Just finished the first draft of another slasher, I’m in rewrites on a haunted house novel, I’ve got another slasher novel I’ll start rewriting soon, and I’ve got my writing fingers in a lot of other ink pots, as well: television, film, comics, and—always—short stories and flash fiction. I’ll never stop writing short stories and flash fiction.



Stephen Graham Jones’s latest:
My Heart Is a Chainsaw

Jade Daniels is an angry, half-Indian outcast with an abusive father, an absent mother, and an entire town that wants nothing to do with her. She lives in her own world, a world in which protection comes from an unusual source: horror movies ... especially the ones where a masked killer seeks revenge on a world that wronged them. And Jade narrates the quirky history of Proofrock as if it is one of those movies. But when blood actually starts to spill into the waters of Indian Lake, she pulls us into her dizzying, encyclopedic mind of blood and masked murderers, and predicts exactly how the plot will unfold.

Yet, even as Jade drags us into her dark fever dream, a surprising and intimate portrait emerges ... a portrait of the scared and traumatized little girl beneath the Jason Voorhees mask: angry, yes, but also a girl who easily cries, fiercely loves, and desperately wants a home. A girl whose feelings are too big for her body. *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* is her story, her homage to horror and revenge and triumph.

THE MOTIVE OF MOTHERHOOD

Why the PTA is a setting of suspense

BY KRISTIN WRIGHT

Military combat has its battlefield. Baseball games have their diamonds. And the Mommy Wars have long played out in the PTA—wrapped in the deceptively shiny paper of the tireless and wholesome work of helping our teachers and improving our children's school experience and outcomes.

Competitive parenting as a bloodsport is on the rise. You might remember the Texas Cheerleader Mom from way back, who had an assassination plot targeting her daughter's cheer rival. In March of 2021, a mom in Pennsylvania who created and forwarded deepfake naked videos of high school girls in an attempt to get them kicked off her daughter's cheerleading team was charged with cyber harassment of a child. With smartphone addictions raging, parents can see their friends and neighbors showing off their offspring's successes at top volume on Facebook and Instagram on a minute-by-minute basis. These constant brag-posts only fuel our instinctive desire for our children to keep up with, and preferably vanquish, all those shiny-faced medal wearers we're assaulted with every day on social media. At all costs.

It's a thriller waiting to happen.

Parent-teacher associations, more commonly known as PTAs, serve a clear and simple purpose (at least on the surface). They do a lot of invaluable work: raising money for school amenities and field trips, holding community events that help invest parents in their children's education, supporting the faculty, and serving as a useful liaison between families and the school administration.

Underneath, however, they're ripe with possibilities for juicy and thrilling fiction.

The PTA, in fiction and in real life, is often ground zero in the cultural and almost always unspoken war between the stay-at-home mom and the working mom. Because neither type has a lock on the desire for their children to succeed, both types join the PTA, allowing them to stare in silent judgment at the other's choices. One is a productive member of society in her own right. One can be truly present for her children in a way that would be impossible if she worked. Each worries, deep down, that she has made the wrong choice.

Nowhere is this conflict more likely to play out than in the PTA. *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty handles this to great effect: the five women at its heart range from high-powered career women to stay-at-home moms to working-class single mothers. Their inherent distrust of each other's class and choices sets up much of the conflict in the book and is the reason the characters aren't able to band together until after the death that is the mystery of the story.

In fiction, the PTA also tends to be populated by judgmental zealots eager to push away anything that smacks of "new" or "cutting edge." It's easy, and fun, to read a character who is established as a foil to PTAs of that type. Bring on the book burnings or the dress code violations or the lifestyle choices and let the protagonist smash them. Iconic film scenes in both *Field of Dreams* and *Footloose* include deliciously satisfying monologues in which the main characters confront and prove the backwardness of the hide-bound PTA types standing in the way of their goals. Those movies aren't thrillers, but they would be, if just one of those PTA parents had taken revenge for being embarrassed at the meeting.

Stephen King has famously said he starts his novel concepts with asking himself "what if" and seeing

where it takes him. What if all these undercurrents at the PTA stopped simmering and boiled over?

Thrillers with female protagonists go all the way back to Miss Marple, but they're enjoying a boom right now, especially those with large casts of women. Though thrillers have long been the province of male writers with male protagonists found in traditionally male fields like law enforcement, the military, politics, and the law, there's been a recent trend in mysteries and thrillers by and about women. These books venture outside the marriage and family setting into other "feminine" milieus, such as academia (*Bad Habits* by Amy Gentry or *They Never Learn* by Layne Fargo), workplaces (*#FashionVictim* by Amina Akhtar), celebrity culture (*Hollywood Homicide* by Kellye Garrett), and of course, suburbia (just about anything by Jodi Picoult or Liane Moriarty).

Because of the competitiveness and judgment that PTAs can so easily foster, they're a natural setting for thrillers. It's not a stretch to imagine the PTA as the province of women at their most cutthroat. There are few things that drive women to backstabbing, betrayal, and bloodshed more quickly than any threat to their children, real or imagined. The stakes are high. Women who have additionally sacrificed their own time, careers, or goals for these children aren't willing to let anything else get in the way.

There's no doubt that readers are hungry for thrillers from the woman's perspective, and in books that take advantage of settings that would once have been too feminine for the mass market. Parental ambition is an evergreen motive in any mystery, suspense, or thriller—and few places distill it better than your neighborhood PTA.

About the author

Kristin Wright is the author of *The Darkest Flower*, a legal thriller about a PTA president accused of poisoning a smoothie at the fifth-grade graduation and the lawyer she hires to defend her. She's a graduate of the University of Michigan Law School and lives in Virginia with her husband, sons, and beagle, Indiana Jones. At various times, she's been a PTA officer and a criminal defense attorney. Learn more at kristinbwright.com.





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Preston & Child

Douglas Preston is a journalist and author who, in addition to his work with Lincoln Child, has also written six solo novels. He has authored a half-dozen nonfiction books on science and exploration and writes occasionally for *The New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, and other magazines.

Lincoln Child has written seven solo novels, including the Jeremy Logan series. Over twenty of the collaborative novels and most of his solo novels have become *New York Times* bestsellers, some reaching the #1 position. Child and Preston’s first novel together, *Relic*, was adapted into a feature film. Their books are notable for their thorough research and scientific accuracy.

Q. The latest in the Pendergast series, *Bloodless*, finds the FBI agent on the case of bodies drained entirely of blood. Your creativity in crime continues. What inspired this story?

Linc: Pendergast undertook his last few investigations in Florida, and we were expecting to see him back in New York by now. However, this detour to Savannah allows us to take full advantage of the city’s long history of colorful and (reputedly) supernatural events. In addition, vampire legends like the one that rises in *Bloodless* fit very nicely into a thriller because, for all the occult attributes one would expect (e.g., sleeping in a coffin, etc.), there are also elements of more typical murders—such as extreme blood loss—that allow us to blend scientific and forensic investigation with the weird and inexplicable.

Doug: Linc and I both love Savannah and long ago saw its potential for a creepy, quasi-supernatural thriller. We finally found a way to bring Pendergast and Agent Coldmoon there. We take full advantage of the setting, including the famed Bonaventure Cemetery.

Q. Why is the American South such a great setting for crime?

Doug: Not only is it Pendergast’s native stomping ground, but the south has such a rich gothic literary history—Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner—that it fits perfectly with the kind of thrillers we write, which often trend slightly to the outré no matter where they’re situated. Besides, having Pendergast leave New York City every now and then seems to have a revivifying effect on his investigations ... even if he is frequently displeased by the change of scenery.

Q. You’ve been able to keep this series fresh twenty books in. What’s the secret to avoiding the rut? And what’s the secret to managing a writing partnership through all these years?

Linc: We almost hate to give away these secrets when they’ve rewarded us so handsomely. But the fact is, they aren’t really secrets, per se. Part of our recipe for success as a partnership is, in fact, the partnership itself. We never let each other take a wrong turn or let our guard down for any length of time. And whatever one of us writes tends to encourage the other partner to friendly, and productive, competition. As for the “rut,” we’ve been lucky in not encountering one. We love to write, and we write the kind of books we’d enjoy reading; if it ever felt laborious, we’d simply stop until the fit passed. And as for the partnership, we’ve simply been very, very lucky: when it comes to co-authoring (fiction, at least), you have to not only respect your partner, but also trust him completely, while keeping a lid on your own ego. You have to find a truly symbiotic niche, where—when it comes to books in progress—one of us can almost finish the other one’s sentences. I can’t think of anyone else I could write novels with except for Doug, and I’m confident he feels the same.

Doug. I do. Linc has been the perfect writing partner. We’re very lucky.

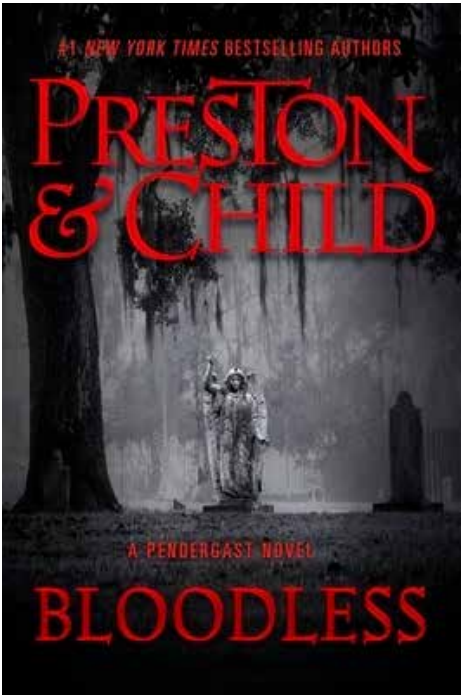
Q. Pendergast had long been under development by Paramount for screen adaptation. What’s the story there?

Doug: This breaks our hearts, so I’ll be brief. When Paramount initially bought the rights to our first book, *Relic*, they also acquired the character rights to Pendergast—even though he didn’t appear in the movie. That complicates things enormously when it comes to making him available now, for either the big or small screen. But it is possible, and we’ve come close a few times—once, very close. All we can say is that Pendergast and his universe seem to us tailor-made for a series; there are numerous existing storylines ready to draw from; and we hope that a producer or showrunner with sufficient imagination will discover this, sooner rather than later!

Q. What are you working on now?

Linc: Currently, we’re hard at work on the third novel in our new series of thrillers featuring two characters originally from the Pendergast universe: archaeologist Nora Kelly, and FBI rookie agent Corrie Swanson.

Doug: The novel is set in New Mexico and involves the Roswell Incident. Enough said.



Preston & Child’s latest: *Bloodless*

A fabulous heist:

On the evening of November 24, 1971, D. B. Cooper hijacked Flight 305—Portland to Seattle—with a fake bomb, collected a ransom of \$200,000, and then parachuted from the rear of the plane, disappearing into the night ... and into history.

A brutal crime steeped in legend and malevolence:

Fifty years later, Agent Pendergast takes on a bizarre and gruesome case: in the ghost-haunted city of Savannah, Georgia, bodies are found with no blood left in their veins—sowing panic and reviving whispered tales of the infamous Savannah Vampire.

A case like no other:

As the mystery rises along with the body count, Pendergast and his partner, Agent Coldmoon, race to understand how—or if—these murders are connected to the only unsolved skyjacking in American history. Together, they uncover not just the answer ... but an unearthly evil beyond all imagining.

Mystery Book Club Questions

10 Questions to Get the Conversation Going

BY JC GATLIN



Are you in book club or discussion group? I've participated in many groups over the years, and mystery and suspense books have always been my favorite genre to read and talk about with fellow readers. The best time in any group discussion is when the members feel passionate about characters, plot points, or the book's ending. Those conversations can get fiery and intense. And, more often than not, it's been the leader's questions that have led to the enthusiastic responses.

I've collected a few questions that've prompted great discussions in past groups. This list has become a go-to resource when I have to think about points I'd like to hit, or even better, if I'm leading the group and have to ask questions to generate conversation. I think they get down to the elements that make for a good mystery or suspense novel.

10 GREAT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MYSTERIES/ SUSPENSE NOVELS

1. Every murder mystery begins with an act of murder. How was the murder in this book? Was it credible or creative? How about shocking or memorable?
2. Great characters make great stories. Were the characters in this book engaging, fully developed, and emotionally complex? Who was your favorite character?
3. The sleuth (whether a PI, a police detective, or an amateur) drives the investigation and carries the story. Was the sleuth in this book competent and worthy of solving the crime? Would you read further crime-solving adventures with this sleuth in a series?
4. Mystery and suspense novels have a reputation for delivering plot twists. Was there a plot twist in this book that you

didn't see coming? How did the twist change the direction of the story, and did it enhance the story or feel forced or farfetched?

5. Books in the mystery-suspense genre have the expectation of being "page-turners." Was this book suspenseful? Did you find yourself becoming anxious as you read it—quickly turning pages to find out what happens next? At what point could you not put the book down?

6. Good books leave an impression on the reader. Were there any passages—ideas, descriptions, dialogue—that you found interesting or revealing? Did anything make you smile or, better yet, make you laugh out loud?

7. A good mystery is a challenge to the reader to solve the crime before the sleuth. Did you solve the mystery and identify the murderer before the big reveal in the end? Did you pick up on the clues or were you, ahem, clueless?

8. Mysteries are famous for their red-herrings—false clues or characters the reader suspects of committing the murder, but didn't. Did any of the red herrings in this book throw you off track? Which character did you think committed the murder?

9. Mystery-suspense novels build to the big reveal and final confrontation. Was murderer's motive believable? How was the ending? Did it leave any unanswered questions or loose ends? Was it predictable? Would you have ended the book differently?

10. The goal of every mystery-suspense novel is to provide you with a few hours of enjoyment. Overall, did you enjoy this book? Did it live up to the standards of a good crime story or suspense thriller? Would you recommend it to others?



About the author

JC Gatlin is an award-winning mystery-suspense author with Millford House Press, the fiction imprint for Sunbury Press. His newest book, *Darkness Hides*, was published in April 2021, and his 2019 mystery *H_NGM_N: Murder is the Word* won "Gold – Top Mystery or Crime Fiction" at the Florida Royal Palm Literary Awards. Prior to that, he wrote three indie novels set in Florida, including *21 Dares*, which went to #1 on Amazon's Top Mystery Suspense and Top Young Adult charts. JC lives in Tampa, Florida, and is a member of the Florida Writers Association and a board member of the Florida Writers Foundation, which gives grants to schools and libraries for literacy programs.



Throwing Flags

BY BRANDON BARROWS

She looked good. Not as good as I remembered and not as good as her profile picture, but still very nice; an attractive, well-put-together woman somewhere in her early forties. There were signs, though, that things weren't as good for Diane Saxton as they might at first seem. A way she carried herself, something a little furtive in her eyes. I guess that was to be expected. She wouldn't have sought me out if things were going well. Life is tough when you peak at seventeen, but nobody who does ever realizes it until much later.

Still, I was surprised to hear from her. We weren't ex-lovers or even old friends. I didn't even know when I last saw her, only that it was decades ago. Youth wasn't good to me and she was part of the years that I put behind me. She was a member of a crowd I never fit in with. I was an outcast from day one and it only got worse when my name appeared in the paper during senior year.

"Thanks for coming, Nick," she said, as she slipped into the seat across the table. Before I could respond, a waiter appeared to take her order. I expected her to order something girly—a sex on the beach or a daiquiri. Something like that. She asked for vodka, straight up. The waiter went away. She turned back to me and said again, "Thanks for coming."

"I was curious." I lifted the glass in front of me, swirled the bourbon around, and set it down without drinking.

The waiter reappeared, put Diane's glass in front of her and, sensing the mood, disappeared again without a word.

She tossed off her drink like water, then said, "I had a hard time finding you."

"I wasn't hiding."

"Well ..." She paused. "I never thought to look for you on FaceSpace, I guess."

"You mean for someone like me." It was not a question. "The terms of service don't ban felons."

She colored a bit, but whether it was the alcohol or chagrin, I didn't know. "I didn't mean ..." she began.

"You did, but it's fine. I did the crime and I did the time." Not much time. Seven months for a botched burglary when you're eighteen is no big deal. Not if you don't let it become one. It taught me a lot, in fact. I've never been caught since. I've been questioned plenty of times, but never charged. It's an art and I've gotten good at it. Good enough that people are willing to pay me for my services.

But how did the ex-prom queen know that? She must have known, or why would we be here?

"So what do you want to talk about that couldn't be an instant message, Diane?"

Any semblance of embarrassment passed out of her features. A hardness replaced it, just for an instant, then her face went blank. Maybe we were finally done playing games. "I need ... something done."

"You mean you want to hire me to do something."

"Yes." She started to raise her hand, to signal the waiter for a refill, but apparently decided against it. Her eyes met mine before darting away again. "Yes, I want to hire you."

Fingers playing with the rim of my glass, I asked, “Who told you I was for hire?”

“A ... friend, who works for the police department.”

That had to be Pete Crawford, former star running-back, currently a lieutenant of detectives. Everyone thought they would get married someday. Now, he was in the middle of his second divorce and more crooked than I could ever be. He and I had some friends in the same circles. It was interesting that he and Diane still kept in touch, though.

“Uh huh,” was all I said. “And what do you want to hire me to do?”

“I don’t want to talk here.”

I looked around, a little theatrically. “Do you see anyone watching us?”

She looked around, too.

“Nobody cares about us but the waiter and he only cares if we’ll tip or not. What do you want to hire me for?” I asked again. I didn’t know the details, but I knew the gist of it already. She wanted me to steal something. It was what everybody wanted from me and generally, I’m happy to do it, as long as there’s enough in it for me.

She bit her lip in sudden doubt, her eyes on the empty glass in front of her. I pushed my half-finished bourbon across to her. She looked up, then snatched the liquor and gulped it down.

I gave her another moment, then said, “I’m not going to fill in the blanks for you, Diane. If you want something, you’ll have to spit it out.”

“I have some jewelry,” she mumbled. Then, louder, “I have a lot of jewelry, actually.” She looked up again. “I want you to steal my jewelry.”

“Your own jewelry. So it’s insurance fraud.”

“It’s not ...” She began, then caught herself. “Yes. I need the money. I have debts my husband doesn’t know about and I want to keep it that way. As long as I deal with the insurance company myself, he’ll probably never care and won’t ever have to know about the rest of it.”

Honestly, it was about what I expected from the start. It was a common enough set-up and something I’ve done in the past.

“Five-thousand dollars. Two thousand up front, the rest before you get the jewelry back. All of it in cash.”

Her eyes widened. “But I don’t have two thousand dollars. I barely have any money of my own right now. That’s why I need you to—”

Her voice was rising and she realized it. She took a deep, shuddering breath. When she spoke again, it was quieter, but there was rage beneath the words. “I told you why I want this done. I don’t have—”

I stood, fished my wallet from my back pocket, and tossed a twenty onto the table. “Then we’re done. Your drink’s on me. For old times’ sake.”

“Wait.” She grabbed my arm. “Nick ... is there any other way I could pay you?”

For the first time that I could remember, in all the years we went to school together, Diane Saxton seemed vulnerable. She looked almost desperate. And twenty-five years ago, an offer like that would have made my head spin. But Diane was no longer a cheerleader and I was no longer a lonely, chubby kid from the wrong side of the tracks. “No.”

I gently shook off her grip. “If you come up with the money, you know how you can get in touch.”

I left her sitting alone at the table, not caring if I ever heard from her again.

The next morning, she surprised me a second time. My cellphone vibrated and when I checked my notifications, I had a message from her that read simply, “Same place @ 3.”

I gave her a thumbs up instead of a real response, knowing it would irritate her. But at three o’clock that afternoon, I was back in the same bar, at the very same table. She sat down moments after I did, a double vodka already in her hand and a big, straw purse slung over her shoulder.

“Do you want to order first?” she asked without any greeting.

“No. I don’t plan to stay long. You have it?”

Her eyes blazed. “You have no idea what I had to do to get it.”

“I don’t want to, either.” That wasn’t entirely true. It was none of my business, though I did wonder. If she could get that much so quickly, why not get whatever other money she needed the same way?

She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead she opened the purse, pulled out a small, thickly-stuffed manila envelope and tossed it onto the table between us. I picked it up and slipped it into the inside pocket of my jacket.

“Aren’t you going to count it?”

“Why?” I asked. “If it’s not all there, I won’t go through with it. Or maybe I will, but I just won’t give the jewelry back.” I smiled thinly.

“If you double-cross me, I’ll tell the cops everything.”

“And get yourself arrested for conspiracy to commit insurance fraud?”

She looked like she wanted to take a bite out of me. I held up a hand. “Relax. If you don’t screw me, I won’t screw you.” I gestured to my breast pocket. “It’s all there?”



She nodded.

“Then there’s no problem. When and how do you want this done?”

“Tonight.”

I shook my head. “Too soon. I can’t—”

Diane reached across the table, strong fingers clamping down on my wrist. “It has to be tonight. Garrett’s business partner is throwing a party and his parties are usually wild. We’ll be gone until probably two or three in the morning and even when we do get home, Garrett will be drunk off his ass. I don’t know when you’ll get a better chance.”

“Okay.” I removed her hand from my arm. I didn’t like it, I hate being rushed, but she was the client and it sounded like it would be a good opportunity, at that. “What’s the set-up? Where is the jewelry?”

She looked around before speaking. There was an energy to her I couldn’t quite place. It wasn’t anger or furtiveness, like the night before. She leaned halfway across the table toward me. “Garrett’s office has a safe, in the wall behind the painting of a fox-hunt. There was a burglary in the neighborhood a few months ago. Since then I’ve kept my jewelry in there.”

“I’m not a safecracker,” I told her, but she cut in, saying, “Garrett has a terrible memory. The combination is on a Post-It note on the underside of his desk-phone.”

It sounded like this would be even easier than I first thought. Too easy. She didn’t need a professional, but if she was willing to pay, who was I to argue?

“And how do I get in?”

“Any way you want, just as long as it looks real.”

“There’ll be some property damage.”

“Good.” She smiled. “It has to look real.”

She gave me the address. I told her not to expect to hear from me for at least a month or so. She warned me again about double-crossing her, but I didn’t bother responding this time.

Just past one a.m., I was in the yard of Diane Saxton’s home. The place was big, bigger than most of its neighbors, with plenty of yard. It was at least eighty feet to the closest house, with a tall, white-washed fence separating the yards. That was good. Less chance of nosy neighbors. On an initial drive-by earlier, when there was still some daylight, I noticed that the name on

the mailbox was Dennison. I decided I liked continuing to think of her as Diane Saxton better. “Diane Dennison” sounded too soap-opera-y, too melodramatic. Maybe she had the same thought; maybe the soaps were what gave her the idea for this little venture.

There was a car in the driveway but no lights on in the house. I stood, watching and listening, for another five minutes and when nothing stirred but the wind in the trees, I walked up to the house. I slipped blue surgical gloves from my pocket and onto my hands as I approached the entry I already spotted—a pair of French doors that faced the side-yard, giving them some screening from the street. I listened at the door for a couple of minutes and when I was sure there was no movement inside, I tried the handle. It was locked, but that was no problem. Diane told me to make it look realistic.

I took a roll of duct-tape from my jacket and made an X across the glass panel closest to the handle. Replacing the roll, I took from my pants pocket a spring-loaded window punch—the kind you can buy in any automotive store as a safety device, in case your car is submerged. With a click of a button and a crack no louder than a snapping twig, I had first the glass panel broken and then the door unlocked and open.

I stepped inside and paused, listening again. There was a creak of settling house and the movement of the wind outside. I found my penlight, in the same pocket I earlier stored Diane’s money, and made my way deeper into the house.

The home-office was where I expected, tucked into a corner of the first floor, and the huge painting of an old-timey fox-hunt was where Diane told me it would be. So was the combination to the safe. I hoped Garrett didn’t pay much for the thing, because he wasn’t going to get his money’s worth.

I had the safe open in less time than it takes to tell and when I flashed the light inside, I had my first real shock of the night. There was jewelry in there, all right, but not much, and even at a glance, it looked to me like costume stuff—gold-plate and glass “stones.” Along with the jewelry, though, was a gun, a snub-nosed .38 revolver. In the light of my flash, its chrome finish glinted brighter than the handful of cheap bracelets and necklaces keeping it company.

There was a sound behind me then, soft enough that it might have been the house settling again, but I knew

it wasn’t. I already learned this house’s sounds and what I heard was a footstep.

“Nick?” Diane’s voice was pitched low and seemed to come from very close by.

I swung around, pointing the flash at the floor. In the splash of its light, I saw her bare feet. I tilted the beam upward until it was somewhere around her waist-level. By its light, I saw she was wearing a tightly-belted, floral-printed, shorty robe. She threw up a hand against the brilliance and said again, “Nick?”

“Jesus Christ, Diane. What are you doing here?” Every nerve in my body was tingling and every instinct told me to run.

I moved the light away from her and slowly she lowered her hands. Shaking her head she said, “The party was a dud. They had out of town clients and kept it pretty sedate. I didn’t know. We’ve been home for two hours, but it was too late to get in touch with you and—”

“Forget it,” I told her. “I’m gone.” I turned and tried to push past her toward the door.

“Wait! Stop,” she hissed, her hand going around my elbow. That same strength she showed me before locked me in place.

I looked down at her hand, then into her eyes. The half-hidden rage was in plain view now. Her eyes seemed lit from within. “Let go, Diane.”

“You’re not going to screw this up for me,” she said. Something poked me in the belly and I felt more than heard the three soft pops. She let go of me then, but it didn’t do me any good. The pain was like heat-blisters forming then instantly bursting, but these holes were more than skin-deep and there was no ointment that would help. Feeling the blood rushing out of me, but unable to grasp exactly what was happening, I staggered and fell, slumped on my side, unable to right myself.

Diane screamed, high and piercing, and shoved the gun into the pocket of her robe.

There was an answering shout from somewhere else in the house, asking what was wrong. It seemed very far away, as if I was hearing it through a bad cellphone connection.

“Garrett! Come here! Quick! I’m in your office!”

Diane walked calmly to the safe, took a handkerchief from the robe, and used it to pick up the revolver. Seconds later, a heavy tromping sounded and the lights in the room went on. A man’s voice asked, “For God’s

sake, what’s going on, Diane?”

In answer, she raised the revolver and fired three times. Through dimming eyes, I saw a hefty balding man collapse to the floor, not far from where I lay.

Then Diane approached me, squatted down, and shoved the revolver into my hand, wrapping my fingers around the butt. I didn’t have the strength to resist her. Looking into my eyes she said, “I don’t suppose you have the two grand on you, do you?”

I tried to say something, to ask why, to curse her ... anything to let her know that she hadn’t won, not yet. But it was hopeless. Nothing came out of my mouth. My tongue was leaden and my head felt detached from my body.

“Oh, well.” She straightened. “Still cheaper than a divorce.”

Plucking the little automatic she shot me with from her pocket, she wiped it and put the gun in her husband’s hand, then crossed to the desk. The last thing I saw was her picking up the phone. Before everything faded to black, I heard her say, “Pete? Your plan worked almost perfectly ... ”

All the red flags made sense now. Too late to do me any good. Maybe I hadn’t learned as much over the years as I thought. Not nearly as much as the prom queen and the running-back, anyway.

Brandon Barrows is the author of the novels *Burn Me Out*, *This Rough Old World*, and *Nervosa*, as well as over fifty published stories, selected of which are collected in the books *The Altar in the Hills* and *The Castle-Town Tragedy*. He is an active member of Private Eye Writers of America and International Thriller Writers. He lives by a big lake in Vermont, with a patient wife and two demanding cats.

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REVIEWS

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS FALL



The Package

Sebastian Fitzek

Fans of the well-paced psychological thriller will be pleased to discover the work of Sebastian Fitzek. With stories that contort the brain, Fitzek keeps the reader guessing by layering ideas and twists into the main story.

This piece was no exception. Emma Stein suffered a great deal of trauma as a child, vowing to help others when she got older.

After attending a conference, she is attacked in her hotel room. It's only afterward that Emma begins to piece things together, though she has self-isolated within her home. When a package is delivered to her, addressed to the neighbor, things begin to unravel and Emma is forced to face all her fears anew.

A stealthy trip to the neighbor's residence reveals much to Emma and she has to wonder if she's made a major discovery that the police will want to explore further. However,

that same curiosity may have put Emma in a web out of which she cannot escape.

Saddled with what she knows and trying to make the right choice, Emma takes matters into her own hands and ends up doing something she will soon regret. This might explain why, in a flash-forward narrative, she is sitting in custody with her lawyer, trying to justify it all. However, even that has an element of tension that cannot be explained away. It's a chilling tale that does not lend itself to easy explanation throughout.

There are times when a good story is made better by a few unexpected twists. This seems to be the approach Fitzek takes in his writing, as each of his books leave the reader rattled and wanting more. His style transcends the written word and buries itself into the core of the reader, something that is not lost in translation from the original German. There is no doubt that Fitzek is a master at his art. This is the kind of story that entertains and disturbs in equal measure.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



Steel Fear

Brandon Webb & John David Mann

A high-octane military thriller (with elements of a locked room mystery) aboard an aircraft carrier at sea, as crew keep disappearing. *Steel Fear* is a character and plot-driven mystery with mounting tension, anxiety, and terror.

The initial disappearances are thought to be suicides, although their notes are typed and unsigned. This occurs shortly after a helicopter and all crew perish in an explosive crash on a routine training mission due to "pilot error."

Shortly after the crash, one of the six helicopters aboard is diverted to Bahrain to pick up a Navy SEAL sniper who will accompany the ship until its final destination in San Diego. Enter the main protagonist, Chief Finn. Our quirky and flawed anti-hero—haunted by a traumatic childhood and somewhat of a recluse—is quite intelligent and calculating with a highly deductive mindset. He certainly belongs to this elite group. Once on board, Finn treats his confinement as a

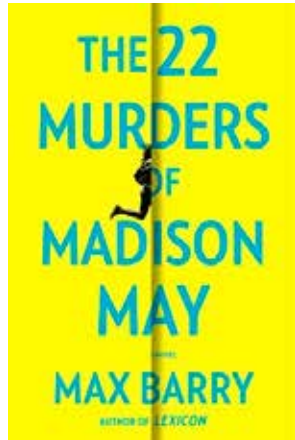
mission. He stalks the corridors of the ship and interacts with crew members while gathering intel. He quickly identifies the crew's low morale due to their long deployment without leave, and also partly due to the ship's poor leadership of their captain.

When crew members continue to disappear, the tension, terror, and anxiety are palpably escalated. In proper psychological warfare, the entire crew is crippled with confusion, chaos, and terror. All soon realize that they are trapped aboard with a serial killer.

Webb and Mann expertly weave a complex and twisted narrative that is thoroughly authentic and chilling. Multiple characters are developed in convincing detail to cast suspicion on their true motivations and actions. Although Finn himself is considered a plausible killer, the twisted reveals cast doubt on many of the players.

Although both authors are best-selling writers of non-fiction, Webb is a decorated Navy SEAL with multiple action-based deployments in his past. This well-suited partnership into fiction is a highly anticipated debut. Hopefully the enigmatic character and background of Finn will be developed further in future novels.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



The 22 Murders of Madison May

Max Barry

When twenty-two-year-old real estate agent Madison May shows a house to a stranger who seems to know a lot about her, she doesn't expect to be murdered.

The stranger is Clay Hors, and he's spent a long time searching for the version of Maddie that fits his dream vision. This won't be the first or the last time he murders a Maddie who

doesn't fit his fantasy.

Journalist Felicity Staples doesn't normally report on crime, but is asked to fill in and sent to the scene of Madison's murder. Following up on a lead, she finds herself accidentally dragged into a different world.

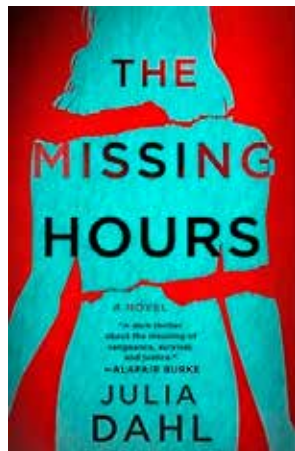
Felicity meets Hugo Garrelly, a member of a shadowy group that can travel across space and time. Together they

will chase Clay as he follows his obsession to find his perfect Madison, determined to stop him from murdering again.

The novel is a perfect mix of serial killer thriller and sci-fi; however, you don't need to be a fan of sci-fi to enjoy this. The story is very inventive in the different but overlapping versions of Madison that are found, which keeps the novel fresh and stops it from becoming repetitive. Unexpected twists are introduced into each scene. Felicity also finds herself in different versions of her own life, something she doesn't always cope with well, especially when it comes to the changes in her boyfriend Gavin and their relationship.

The action is fast and engaging right from the start. Felicity changes over the course of the novel as she comes to see what is most important to her for the life she wants to lead. The result? A very enjoyable thriller with a very satisfying ending.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



The Missing Hours

Julia Dahl

At first glance, NYU freshman Claudia Castro appears to have it all. She's a member of the elite: a trust fund baby with a famous father enjoying mega social media followers. The envy of her peers. Take off the rose colored glasses, and you'll see a dysfunctional family in the process of disintegrating with devastating effects.

After a night of heavy drinking at a college party, Claudia awakes from a blackout to find her clothes in bloody disarray and body severely battered. Aching and limping, Claudia's mind is fuzzy, and try as she may, she can't fill in the missing hours.

Just as Claudia settles back into a semi-normal routine, interrupted by fraught psychotic episodes, disastrous evidence of what happened that fateful night surfaces social media, spreading like wildfire. Shamed, taunted, and chastised as a slut, Claudia is forced into the limelight where even her friends doubt her innocence. Social media becomes judge and jury, convicting her without a trial. Life as Claudia knows it is over. And then ... she disappears. Her family is frantic. What happened to her?

The Missing Hours is a dark, edgy story of obsession, entitlement, and consequences. For every action, there is a

reaction. But are consequences the same for the privileged? One of the perpetrators on the cell phone video is from a wealthy, powerful family, and the other is on the verge of a record contract worth millions. The stakes are high for them and their families who secretly work to silence those who dare accuse the men of rape. What makes this case different is that Claudia's family also has the means to seek justice for their missing daughter. It becomes a battle of the entitled.

Told from multiple points of view with short, choppy chapters that drive a frantic pace, this story is propelled forward with a dark atmosphere of malice. Bouncing from one narrator to the next, it's easy to burn through pages with trepidation trying to determine what really happened as Claudia herself still doesn't know. As the story unfolds, readers will feel the tone shift from deep despondency to rabid, flaming rage fed by dark, convoluted thoughts of retaliation and revenge, raising the question: If the court system fails you, do you have the right to sentence those who have wronged you? Is using wealth for retaliation any different than using it for privilege? Does seeking retaliation ever really right a wrong?

Dahl gives readers a lot to think about in this riveting, traumatic story of one woman's journey to reclaim her life and mend ties with her family. Intense, gritty, and quite graphic, *The Missing Hours* will appeal to fans of suspense and those who enjoy revenge with a few surprises along the way. Clear your calendar as you'll want to read this book in one sitting.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



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ATTICA LOCKE

Attica Locke is the award-winning thriller writer of five novels. Her work includes Edgar Award-winning *Bluebird*, *Bluebird*; *Pleasantville*, the winner of the Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction; and *The Cutting Season*, winner of the Ernest Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. Locke works as a screenwriter as well. Most recently, she was a writer and producer on Netflix's *When They See Us* and the Hulu adaptation of *Little Fires Everywhere*.



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Tell Me

Anne Frasier

After finding out her father is a serial killer, Reni Fisher is not okay. She leaves her job at the FBI and wants a simple life of creating the art she loves so much ... even if her paintings are of the places her father left his victims.

But when detective Daniel Ellis calls, needing help with a case, she knows she is best suited to head up to the Pacific

Crest Trail to survey the scene. Reni is also called because something isn't quite right at the scene: it looks staged.

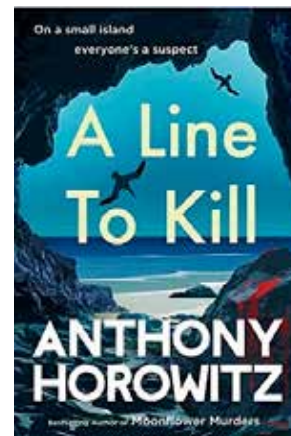
The only lead they have in the case is a video uploaded to social media showing the murder scene. The woman who uploaded it disappeared into thin air and no one is sure if it's a hoax or the real thing. Regardless, there is the dead body of a hiking guide and three missing teenage girls, so something has gone horribly wrong.

Readers of Frasier's *Find Me* already know that her Inland Empire series is bound to be a hit. (*Tell Me* is the second in this series, and it's just as compelling). Frasier does an amazing job drawing the reader into the story immediately. Reni is a dynamic, interesting, and flawed character who is easy to connect with. Her relationship with Daniel is real and heartwarming, especially when they've both been through so much. Broken characters are beautiful, and these two form a connection despite their pain.

The California setting is a character in itself: the dry heat of the desert, the fresh air of the mountains, and the lonely stretches of drive all add context and atmosphere to a heart-pounding story.

This book includes social commentary about male entitlement, anger and fear of students, and the dangers of social media. It's perfect for people who are just starting to read thrillers and want to go on a fun and mysterious journey. It is easy to follow, easy to connect with, and has a satisfying ending.

Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann



A Line To Kill

Anthony Horowitz

This third installment of the Hawthorne and Horowitz series chronicles the exploits of former police detective, current P.I. David Hawthorne and the man hired to embellish his reputation, mystery novelist Anthony Horowitz.

Yes, Horowitz is the author of books about Daniel Hawthorne as written by Anthony Horowitz. Quite a twist.

With an unfinished book and overdue deadlines, Hawthorne and Horowitz aren't clicking. Their publisher believes that a jaunt to Alderney, a small island off the English coast, to attend a book festival would be a good opportunity for writer and P.I. to get the book completed.

The festival features a program of five other presenters: a war historian expert in Alderney's WWII occupation, a former TV chef turned cookbook author and his assistant, a much beloved children's author, and a French performance poet. Hawthorne and Horowitz will appear last and be the "no book" book promoters.

The day of the festival arrives and with it an invitation to a cocktail party at the architecturally outstanding home of the wealthy businessman Charles Le Mesrier and his wife. The magnificent modern mansion has wonderful views of the sea and a gorgeously decorated interior. Guests and host mingle and there are a few pointed exchanges, some personal, some political. As guests begin to depart, Charles Le Mesrier is nowhere about.

The next morning is departure day. But there will be no departures, as the host has been found brutally murdered. Now we will get to see Hawthorne's skills as he investigates the murder.

Weaving through conflicting stories, fake clues, odd events, twisted tales, and hidden agendas, Hawthorne with (a small bit of) help from Horowitz manages to piece together the information and arrive at how the crimes were committed, and importantly, why.

In all, this is an interesting read. The real Anthony Horowitz knows how to construct a story that builds, sometimes turning you to the left when you should be looking to the right.

Reviewed by Jennifer Bradford

November 9, 2021 | HC | \$26.99 | 9781643852973



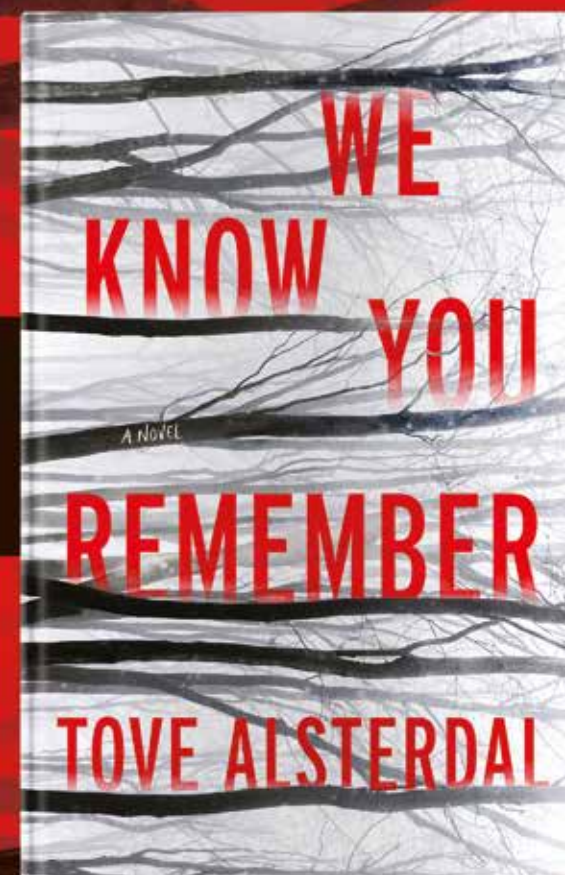
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A missing girl, a hidden body,
a decades-long cover-up,
and old sins cast in new light.

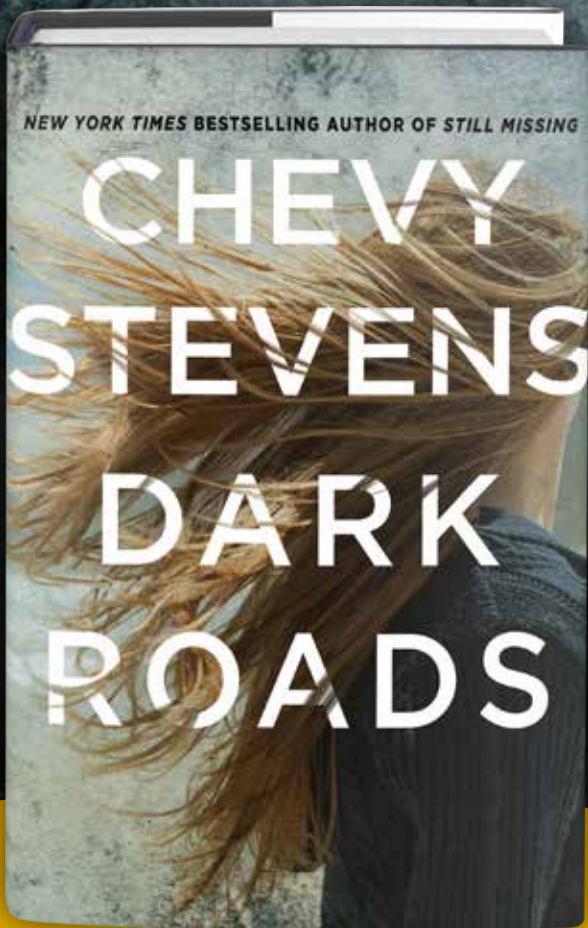
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Fan Fiction: A Mem-Noir

Brent Spiner

Fan Fiction presents the wild story of someone who believes themselves to be Lal, a daughter created by Data, author Brent Spiner's character on *Star Trek, The Next Generation*. Throughout the story, Spiner weaves fiction with fact, characters with actual people, and the reader is in a constant state of trying to decide if any of these things

ever happened. There is just enough truth in what he writes to have the readers constantly reminding themselves they've been told what they are reading is untrue.

For example, he includes several interactions with friends from the television industry: Jonathan Frakes, Genie Francis, Patrick Stewart, Gene Roddenberry. He recounts events involving actors from the show that have a ring of truth.

At the same time, there are two drop-dead gorgeous women, twins, one of whom is an FBI agent and the other a contract bodyguard. He develops feelings for both. These portions of the book seem more likely to have come from a very creative brain.

Spiner's family, particularly his former step-father, is also featured. His step-father is not a sympathetic character and the reader may wonder if the stories of his growing up, some of which border on child abuse, are true tales of a difficult childhood. In the book, the memory of his step-father haunts Spiner to the point of losing sleep. Then there's the part that deals with a kidney stone, percocet, and quaaludes where, at places, the reader may simply shake their head and say “that can't possibly have happened.”

So, is this a book that is a must-read? In terms of a masterpiece of literature, probably not. In terms of a sometimes laugh-out-loud funny book that will delight fans and others who are looking for a light-hearted story that borders on being a caricature of a mystery novel, most definitely. It's short and easy to read, so most readers can finish it in a day or two if they want, while others can easily pick it up or put it down without losing a sense of what's happening.

If you're hoping for a book that will give insight into *Star Trek*, its characters, and filming, this is not that. If you're hoping for a book that will entertain you and that you can take to the next *Star Trek* “con” so you can get Spiner to sign it, look no further. This is not a serious mystery, but it is well-written, sometimes outrageous, and entertaining.

Reviewed by Gail Byrd



The Perfect Life

Nuala Ellwood

After her mother died when she was a young child, Vanessa dreamt of having a perfect life with the perfect husband and children living in the perfect house. She thought she'd found her perfect man in Connor Dawkins, but then their relationship started to fall apart as she found it harder and harder to please him.

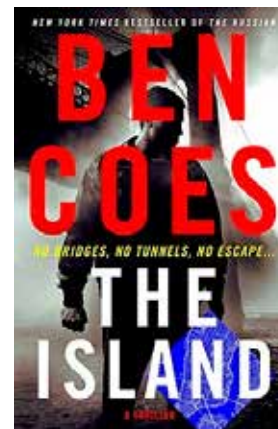
As life grew more stressful for Vanessa, she became addicted to real estate apps, fantasising about living in the houses she saw there. She would make an appointment with a real estate agent to view one she could never afford, and then she would dress up, taking on a different persona. Once in the house of her dreams, she would fantasise about the life she and her fantasy family could have. It seemed like harmless escapism until the owner of one of the properties is found dead in his home and the police identify Vanessa as the last person to see him alive while viewing his house.

Told in two timelines, then and now, Vanessa takes us through the last year as her life starts to spiral out of control, from meeting Connor, to becoming estranged from her closest friend, to eventually becoming homeless and jobless, and now a murder suspect. The slow unravelling of her relationship with Connor is well done, although his motivation for his treatment of her is unclear.

The novel builds tension slowly as the scene is set and Vanessa's relationship with Connor plays out. It's clear from the outset that Connor is extremely skilled at manipulating vulnerable women. Although his relationship with Vanessa is far from perfect, it takes her some time to open her eyes. It's hard not to become frustrated with her as she tries so hard to be the woman she thinks Connor wants. She's not an easy character for the reader to empathise with, as her difficult upbringing has left her fragile and naïve and far too trusting for an independent woman in her thirties.

More a domestic suspense than a thriller, this is nevertheless an absorbing story, perfect for a lazy summer read.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



The Island

Ben Coes

Fans of political thrillers, take notice. Coes mixes wonderful political backstories with intense strategic fighting in novels that show just how important agents of the CIA can be in the protection of America.

In the latest from the Dewey Andreas series, it would appear that the Republic of Iran has been working with Hezbollah to

strike terror into the hearts of Americans with a plot like no other. Targeting the sitting US president, they set their sights on Manhattan, as the UN General Assembly is expecting the Leader of the Free World to speak. What follows is a harrowing tale that pushes Andreas to act swiftly, trying to save America from what could be its worst attack yet. It's sensational writing in a series that keeps getting better.

A CIA operative, Andreas has foiled plots hatched by some of the world's most ruthless countries and assassinated many. However, with this fame comes a large target on his back. While working with Hezbollah, the Iranians concoct a plan to bring America to its knees and see Andreas dead, but it will take precise planning to work.

Andreas narrowly escapes and agrees to a unique bit of R&R with a woman he is getting to know. While he's resting up, all eyes are on New York City, where US President Dellenbaugh is set to address the UN General Assembly. Hundreds of Hezbollah fighters are strategically positioned to take out all access to Manhattan by exploding massive bombs in the tunnels connecting the city.

With Dellenbaugh inside the UN, more forces storm the building, leaving many dead. Dellenbaugh, a past sports star, wants to defend himself, but soon discovers that these are men on a mission, willing to die for their cause. As the game of cat and mouse commences, many scramble to find safety amidst all the chaos.

This is the ninth novel in the series, which has not lost any of its intensity or intrigue. Dewey Andreas is in fine form and shows why he is a key character in the genre, happy to help his country in whatever way possible. Adding some intense political drama and a secondary plot to keep the reader enthralled, Coes shows why he belongs with other household names in the thriller genre. Of course, there remain a few threads left untied for future novels.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



Nice Girls

Catherine Dang

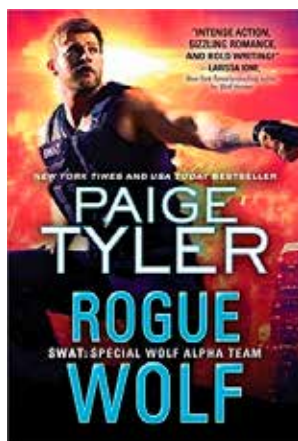
Is anyone really a nice girl?

Mary doesn't think so. After years of being the fat, awkward, forgettable girl from Liberty Lake, Minnesota, she wants to change her town's perspective of her.

She worked hard and now she's known as "Ivy League Mary"—the girl who got out and attended the prestigious Cornell

University. Now she's back in Liberty Lake after being kicked out her senior year. No one knows why, but she is almost unrecognizable.

Soon after Mary's return, the beautiful and popular Olivia Willand goes missing. Mary was childhood friends with Olivia, but after a falling out, Mary knows Olivia's dark side. She can't help but obsess about the case and starts looking into her disappearance, along with another girl who also went missing from Liberty Lake. As she starts to dig into Olivia's life, Mary begins to bring up the past and everything that comes with it.



Rogue Wolf

Paige Tyler

With *Rogue Wolf*, Paige Tyler brings murder, romance, and action to the twelfth book in the SWAT: Special Wolf Alpha Team paranormal romantic suspense series. Set in contemporary times in Dallas, Texas, this novel features SWAT werewolf Trey Duncan and Assistant Medical Examiner Dr. Samantha Mills.

Trey and Samantha have been attracted to each other for two years, but Trey hasn't asked her out on a date yet. When Samantha decides to cash in on one of the favors Trey owes her for a dinner date, it seems that it will be the right time for them to talk about their true feelings for each other. However, a serial killer case and another highly unusual case tend to constantly interrupt their conversations.

Trey and Samantha are fantastic characters. While Trey is an alpha and protective, Samantha is a strong female protagonist. They balance each other well. Despite being attracted to each other, there are secrets that neither seems to get a chance to share due to the dual case load. They are definitely not boring, but will their secrets and flaws eventually doom the romance? The secondary characters are well-rounded

Nice Girls explores the pressure girls have to be the best version of themselves. High school can be a hard time for girls specifically, and this book showed how that pressure is not always a good thing. It also pointed out how friendships are not always born of connection, but sometimes of convenience.

Catherine Dang is an asset to the woman's suspense genre. She layers the story so it builds and slowly lets the reader in. Readers will feel for Mary without completely trusting her, always wondering if there was something going on beneath the surface. The book was hard to put down and made it easy to imagine the dark and gritty setting in two specific parts of town.

Nice Girls also covers anxiety, depression, and the importance of mental health. It points out racism in the police force and the media, and inequality in the way crimes are investigated. It brought up many important points while also being an exciting and mysterious read. This debut is a great read for lovers of other books in the genre, including *All The Missing Girls* and *Luckiest Girl Alive*.

Reviewed by Chelsea Aguilera

and provide needed support and conflict, and up the stakes for the relationship. Characters from previous books in the series make appearances, but the focus remains on Trey and Samantha.

The plot is complex with lots of twists and turns, and the stakes are high. The author does a nice job explaining her unique take on werewolves. It's a riveting story with likeable protagonists who readers will cheer on as their cases progress—and become ever more dangerous and unusual.

This book delivers on escapism through attraction, friendship, family, romance, and love while also tackling serious issues like secrets, stressful situations, workplace politics, serial killers, PTSD, family relationships, and selfless sacrifice. While most conflicts and issues are resolved, there are a couple of threads that may end up in future books in the series.

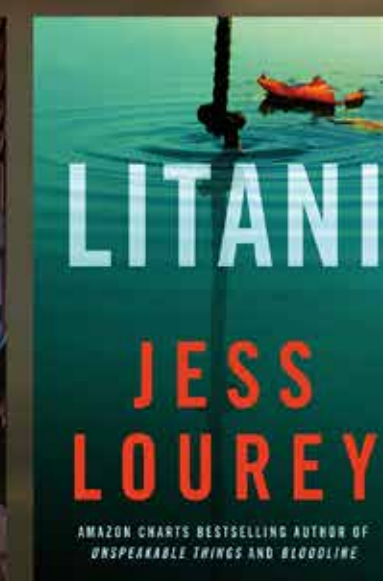
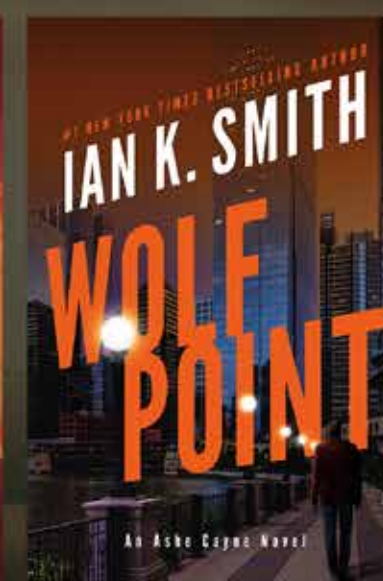
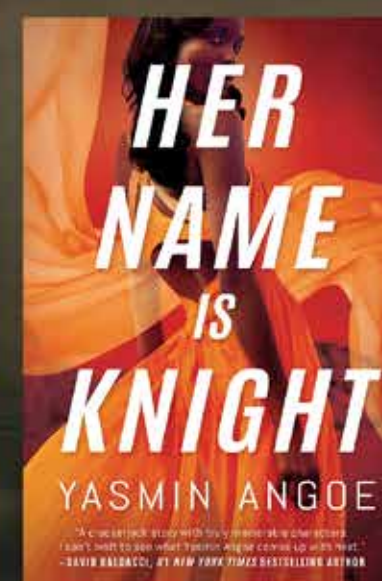
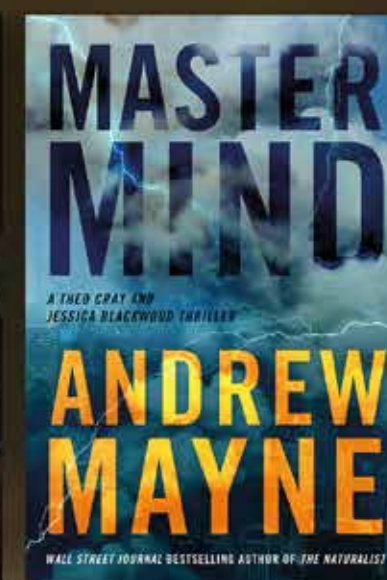
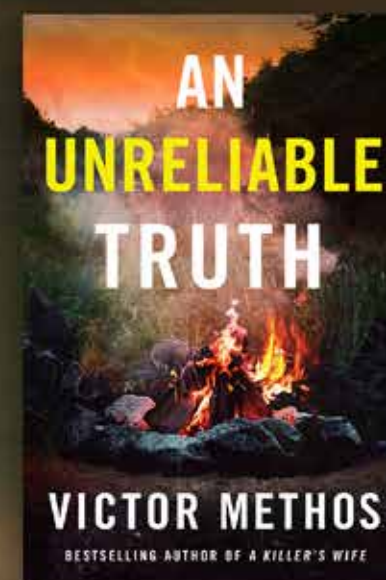
Overall, it was suspenseful, full of danger, action-packed, sinister, and compulsively readable. This engaging combination delivered on the promise of its premise and opening scenes. The subplots tied together well, the main characters were strong and the ending was explosive. If you enjoy thrilling paranormal romantic suspense novels, check out this series. There is enough background that this novel can be read as a standalone, but the series is best read in order.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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