

# MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

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# BEST BOOKS OF 2022

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**Feature: 10 Ways to Die  
in the Apocalypse**  
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**Author Q&A: Dean Koontz**  
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**Feature: Big Thrills  
in a Small Town**  
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**Short Fiction:  
"Cinnamon-Red"**  
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**Reviews: *You'll Be the Death of  
Me*, *Vanishing Point*, and more**



It's no mystery—these books make the perfect holiday gift!



Available in hardcover, ebook, and audiobook.



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We've interviewed some of the greats of the genre. You'll love hearing what they have to say.



Sam Boush  
Editor-in-Chief

There's so much going on in this issue! Our "Best Books of 2022" list is out. It's hot. It's incomplete. It's far too early. But these are titles mystery, thriller, horror, and suspense readers are going to want to scribble hard onto their to-be-read lists for the year. This quarter's original fiction submission, "Cinnamon-Red," is a Chernobyl horror that will bulge readers' eyes. And speaking of fear, we've got several features written for lovers of thrills—from "10 Ways to Die in the Apocalypse" to why small towns are full of big thrills. And so many more! Finally, our interviews with some of the greats of the genre—James Rollins, Iris Johansen, Rachel Hawkins, and Dean Koontz—are just right for readers looking for deeper knowledge on the authors and books they love. It's cold out there. Bundle up. Grab a book. And as always, visit us at [mysteryandsuspense.com](http://mysteryandsuspense.com) for daily reviews, features, interviews, and more.

All the best,  
Sam

**Mystery & Suspense Magazine**  
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# POLITICAL MYSTERIES

When the thirst for power leads to murder

BY MARK WILLEN

What do love, greed, and envy have in common? They're all great motives for murder. Check out any good mystery, and chances are high that one or more of those qualities are behind the evil deed. But lurking beneath those motives is often something else—the lust for power, either power over an individual or a group. And it's that lust for power that defines a political mystery. Politics, after all, is the art of getting someone to do what you want them to do—sometimes for noble causes and sometimes for selfish reasons, sometimes through persuasion or incentives, sometimes through blackmail or violence. And when neither reason nor threats work on

those blocking your path, well, you just may have to get rid of them. And that's the makings of a good political mystery.

## ANCIENT INTRIGUE

Political power is hardly a new source of suspense and drama. The thirst for control goes back to the beginning of time, and we find it in literature as early as ancient Greece and through the Middle Ages. Shakespeare made a living off of it. Think of *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*. These were not political mysteries in the true sense because we knew from the start who was guilty, but no one did a better job than the bard when it came to examining the underlying hunger for power. Traitors like those who did in Caesar populate political thrillers to this day, and many authors are still trying to





replicate the evil in *Lady Macbeth*, though no one has done it as well as Shakespeare.

Trying to date the modern political mystery is a fool’s errand, but consider Dashiell Hammett’s *The Glass Key*, which was published in 1931. That was a time when political power was local, and muscle was the only kind of lobbying in vogue for the ward bosses who held it. Hammett’s violent scenes seem mild compared to today’s, but he knew when and how to use them to keep a plot moving.

Hammett’s real strength, though, was in dialogue and character development. He is able to paint a picture with just a sentence or two, and every page is a textbook for writers who want to learn how to show and not tell. Here’s one example: “The smile that had nothing to do with pleasure was lifting the ends of Ned Beaumont’s lips again and his eyes glittered through cigar smoke. He shook his head slowly and spoke slowly in an unpleasantly sweet tone.” Think of all that conveys about the mood and atmosphere in the room and how it sets the scene for what’s to come.

The cozy version of the political mystery became popular later in the 1900s when two writers with famous names took advantage of their front row seats to the presidency. Elliott Roosevelt, son of FDR, and Margaret Truman, daughter of Harry, each helped author two dozen mysteries with such unimaginative titles as *Murder in the Oval Office*, *Murder in*

*the Rose Garden*, *Murder at the FBI*, *Murder on Capitol Hill*, *Murder on ... well, you get the idea.*

Unfortunately, the books were only a little more imaginative than the titles.

Roosevelt used his mother, Eleanor, as his lead detective, a role that allowed her to employ the full powers of the presidency as she gave orders to everyone from the Secret Service to the D.C. police. His novels borrow heavily from history. *Murder in the Lincoln Room*, for example, takes place during the 1943 Trident Conference when Churchill secretly visited the White House to discuss the timing of the D-Day invasion.

The Roosevelt novels are often compared to those of Agatha Christie, but the similarity is mostly in mood and format, including the gathering of all the suspects at the end, though Roosevelt usually puts them in the Cabinet room rather than the parlor. But Christie was more original, and she had a much greater flair for character development.

Truman adopted a similar format, and like Roosevelt, made ample use of her inside knowledge. Indeed, the biggest draw of the novels is the descriptions of life in the inner sanctums, and of course both authors had impeccable credentials for that. (Note that both Roosevelt and Truman relied on ghost writers. Many of Roosevelt’s books weren’t even published until after his death.)

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## MODERN MYSTERIES

A more recent novel that combines political mystery with historical fiction is *The Lincoln Deception* (2013) by David O. Stewart. Stewart puts a speculative spin on the plot to kill Lincoln and the failed attempts to kill Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward. The novel opens in 1900, when a doctor hears a deathbed confession by a former prosecutor who talks of a scandal that would rock the nation, and then proceeds to uncover a wide-ranging plot to decapitate the entire Union government. Stewart does a nice job of making the whole thing sound plausible.

Genuine political mysteries taking place in this century are much harder to find because most writers interested in politics have been opting for pure thrillers, often influenced by the 9/11 attacks. Terrorism combined with political conspiracies drives hundreds of political thrillers, which draw big audiences, often at the expense of political mysteries. There is obviously a lot of overlap between the two sub-genres, but let’s focus on mysteries, which have a strong “whodunit” theme. Thrillers are mainly driven by fear and suspense, rather than a need for deduction.

David Baldacci has published dozens of novels that tend to mix political mystery with the elements of a thriller. One of the best is *First Family*, which opens with the kidnapping of the president’s niece in the midst of a re-election campaign. Sean King and Michelle Maxwell, two ex-Secret Service operatives who star in several Baldacci novels, are asked by the First Lady to find the niece, and it soon becomes apparent that the president’s wife has reasons of her own for going around the FBI.

Another excellent modern political mystery is John Sandford’s *Dead Watch*. Sandford is the prolific author of more than fifty novels in three popular series of thrillers

**Originally a novel, *House of Cards* continues to have a major impact on the genre, with authors eager to exploit the public’s dislike of corrupt or evil politicians.**

(the Prey novels, the Flower novels, and the Kidd novels), but *Dead Watch* is more of a standalone with a strong political element. The novel opens with the murder of a former GOP senator in Virginia, perhaps at the hands of the vigilante watchman group aligned with the ambitious Democratic governor of the state, who is also angling for the VP slot on the presidential ticket.

A discussion of political mysteries wouldn’t be complete without mentioning *House of Cards*, which continues to have a major impact on the genre. The novel that began it all was written by Michael Dobbs, himself a British politician, in 1989, and later made into a British and then an American TV series. The U.S. version ran for six seasons ending in 2018. The plots were all built upon the ruthless pursuit of power by an unscrupulous politician and his even more ambitious wife. It has spawned all kinds of look-alikes, with authors eager to exploit the public’s dislike of corrupt or evil politicians and to have fun turning their wives (for some reason, it’s never the politician’s husband) into an evil monster.

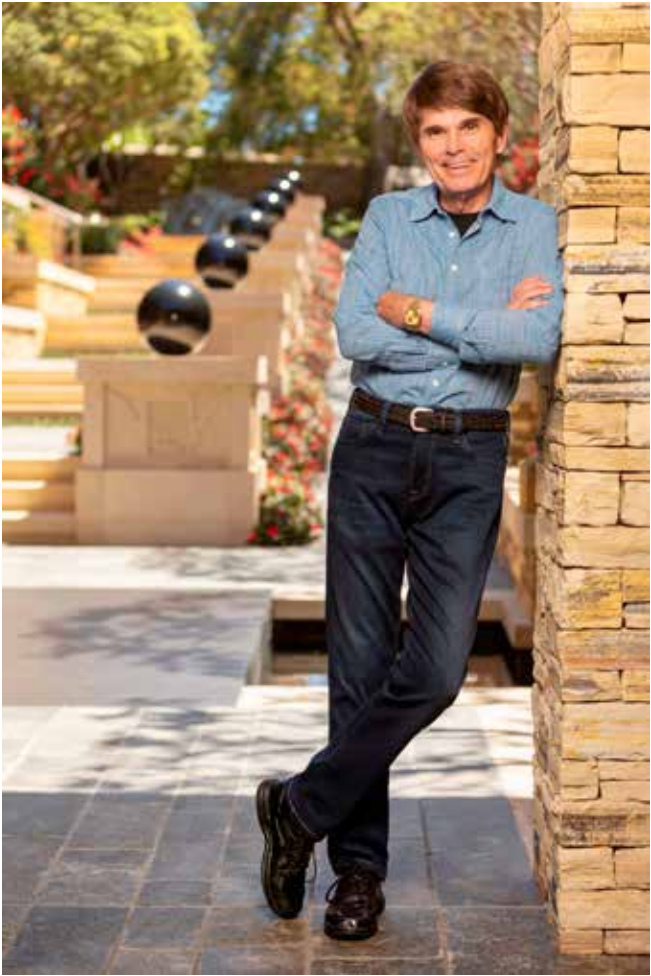
The *House of Cards* phenomenon is a good reminder that nobody really likes members of Congress unless they are dead—good fodder for a political mystery.



### About the author

**Mark Willen puts his experience as a political reporter in Washington to good use in his mystery, *The Question Is Murder* (Pen-L Publishing, May 2021), a whodunit that finds an investigative reporter in the middle of a search for the killer of a U.S. senator. He is also the author of the three-book Jonas Hawke series. Visit him online at [markwillen.com](http://markwillen.com) or find him on Twitter at @markwillen.**





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Dean Koontz

Fourteen of Dean Koontz’s novels have risen to #1 the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list (*One Door Away From Heaven*, *From the Corner of His Eye*, *Midnight*, *Cold Fire*, *The Bad Place*, *Hideaway*, *Dragon Tears*, *Intensity*, *Sole Survivor*, *The Husband*, *Odd Hours*, *Relentless*, *What the Night Knows*, and *77 Shadow Street*), making him one of only a dozen writers ever to have achieved that milestone. Sixteen of his books have risen to the #1 position in paperback. He lives in Southern California with his wife, Gerda, their golden retriever, Elsa, and the enduring spirit of their goldens, Trixie and Anna.

**Q. The premise of your upcoming page-turner, *Quicksilver* (January 2022, Thomas & Mercer) is hallmarked by a “strange magnetism” that directs the actions of Quinn Quicksilver. What inspired the story?**

**Dean:** I am in the habit of writing change-ups to keep myself excited, which has tended to drive some of my publishers to drink—though not my current one, as far as I know. If I’ve driven the folks at Thomas & Mercer to drink, they have successfully hidden it from me.

The five Jane Hawk novels had a thread of humor, as did *Devoted* and *Elsewhere*, but *The Other Emily* was too dark for humor. After all that, I was ready to write something that was suspenseful but also flat-out comic, especially during the first two acts. When there’s suspense, that always tends to take center stage in the third act and push the comedy to the wings. I heard Quinn Quicksilver’s voice in my head and knew he was just the guy to make me laugh out loud even in the tensest moments of the story.

**Q. You once said, “Suspense is the constant of good fiction, whether genre or literary.” And, unsurprisingly, *Rolling Stone* has called you “America’s most popular suspense novelist.” Why is suspense so important to story?**

**Dean:** Suspense is central to our lives. We don’t know what’s going to happen to us next week, tomorrow, or an hour from now. We live on the brink, though we’re very good at pushing that to the back of our minds. If suspense is the through line of our lives, it is therefore essential to good fiction. What do I want readers to feel? Everything. I don’t always succeed, but in the better books, I’d like to stir all the reader’s emotions.

**Q. You’ve also said, “Character is everything in fiction.” How did Quinn’s character resonate with you while you were writing *Quicksilver*?**

**Dean:** What I found most interesting was Quinn’s youthful innocence and semi-naïve optimism, which somehow he’d managed to hold fast to after a great trauma and deep depression when he was eleven. In moments of peril and when existential dread afflicts him, he counsels himself through it with humor. I wondered how he got from that period when he was eleven to where he is at nineteen. I suppose I wondered because, through the dark circumstances of my own childhood, I always resisted despair with humor, and I still find humor in the darkest moments of life. Quinn isn’t me.

He’s better looking, quicker on his feet. But we coped with the vicissitudes of life the same way, so there was a bit of self-exploration in writing about him.

**Q. Famously, your wife supported your dream of writing in the early days, both emotionally and financially. You were able to break through in fewer than five years. Do you think the business of writing has changed?**

**Dean:** I would have been nowhere without Gerda. We’ve been two horses pulling the plow. I’m the one who looks like a plow horse, and she’s the beautiful mare who should always have been winning ribbons in dressage competitions, but she never complains, just keeps on pulling.

Has the business changed? Greatly. And for the worse. It was a great mistake letting the mass-market paperback mostly die because some thought its price point was too low. Mass market was where new writers learned; because paperbacks were so widely distributed, there were all these places you went in a day where you saw all those little posters—the book covers—enticing you. They inspired impulse purchases. They made books visible to an extent no other format ever did or can. There was a time when we’d sell 2 million or even more paperbacks of a title in the first year, and it was from those sales that a readership in hardcover was built. All gone. The e-book helps, but it’s not out there in the grocery store, the drug store, Target, Walmart, enticing you as paperbacks once did.

It’s much harder for young writers to break in. It was never easy, but it was never as merciless as it is these days. So much of what publishers promote is driven by various media- and celebrity-sponsored book clubs. Most of what they choose is, I’m sorry to say, rather bland. It’s difficult to imagine one of them choosing something like a James M. Cain novel or Larry Block in his darkest mode or anything by the late, great Donald Westlake. A kind of numbing sameness prevails, and that can’t be good for the long-term health of fiction.

**Q. Many of your bestselling titles are often categorized as horror (*Odd Thomas*, *Watchers*, *Intensity*, and more)—though they just as easily fit the mystery and thriller**

**categories. How do you see genre? Does it matter to the writer or reader?**

**Dean:** I’ve never liked labels. They limit the audience. Every genre is capable of producing works of the highest level, and I consider literary fiction another genre. *Odd Thomas* is a version of Holden Caulfield, but he’s neither neurotic nor self-absorbed, like Holden, and he happens to see spirits of the dead. He’s also a lot funnier than Holden. But each in his own way is finding a route through a world of indifference and deceit. *Intensity* isn’t about horror; it’s about the indefatigable nature of the human spirit and about “reckless caring” for others, even strangers, that the best among us exhibit. Sonny Mehta publicly called it “avant garde,” which I could not for the longest time understand, until he eventually said he meant that its style and themes are not common to stories involving a serial killer. I suppose so. Anyway, I don’t think readers care so much about genre as they do about being moved and entertained.

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

**Dean:** I’ve finished a book about a woman who has forgotten a “secret friend” from childhood and finds herself drawn back to a ranch in Montana, where she was raised, for a rendezvous with the forgotten—and very strange—other, who turns out not to be imaginary. It’s a complex story, but what it’s really about is how the promises of ideology and technology can, when entwined, lead us not to utopia but potentially to oblivion.

I’m three-quarters done with a book about a woman who lives alone on an island, where the peace she seeks turns out to be illusory and the threats extraordinary. What it’s really about is corruption—in government, the sciences, the law—and the ultimate corruption of the elitists who dismiss and despise anyone not of their class.

After that, I’m plunging back into the territory of *The Husband* and *Velocity*. Or at least I think I am. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?



Dean Koontz’s latest: *Quicksilver*

Quinn Quicksilver was born a mystery—abandoned at three days old on a desert highway in Arizona. Raised in an orphanage, never knowing his parents, Quinn had a happy if unexceptional life. Until the day of “strange magnetism.” It compelled him to drive out to the middle of nowhere. It helped him find a coin worth a lot of money. And it practically saved his life when two government agents showed up in the diner in pursuit of him. Now Quinn is on the run from those agents and who knows what else, fleeing for his life.

During a shoot-out at a forlorn dude ranch, he finally meets his destined companions: Bridget Raining, a beauty as gifted in foresight as she is with firearms, and her grandpa Sparky, a romance novelist with an unusual past. Bridget knows what it’s like to be Quinn. She’s hunted, too. The only way to stay alive is to keep moving.

Barreling through the Sonoran Desert, the formidable trio is impelled by that same inexplicable magnetism toward the inevitable. With every deeply disturbing mile, something sinister is in the rearview—an enemy that is more than a match for Quinn. Even as he discovers within himself resources that are every bit as scary.



# 10 WAYS TO DIE IN THE APOCALYPSE

BY MARCUS MARTIN

If you're gonna die in an apocalypse, you might as well go out in style. Here are ten of the most iconic ways to get wrecked by Armageddon, and ten books to read that follow these themes.

## #1: NUCLEAR FALLOUT

Uh-oh. Someone got an itchy finger near the big red button. Or maybe hackers took control of a bunch of silos directly. ICBMs are hurtling across the ocean toward population centers around the world, and auto-response dead hand protocols are firing back. Within 30 minutes, half of the global population has gone in a blinding flash of light, and the rest are about to enjoy radiation poisoning and a chilly nuclear-winter. Worst after-party ever.

Check out: *Swan Song* by Robert McCammon

## #2: EMP DETONATION

After three years in a nuclear bunker, your supplies are spent. You and the others bravely take to the surface, armed with shotguns, baseball bats, and questionable hairstyles. To your delight, you find the city around you survived the blast and is a bustling metropolitan hub. For a moment you relish the sound of traffic, the blinking adverts, the tapping of smart phones. Then a boom rings out overhead. A hyper-sonic missile just detonated above the city. There's no

explosion this time. Just the harrowing silence of every electronic device on Earth being rendered useless. A solar flare could have had much the same effect, but this was intentional; an attack. Devoid of technology, this civilized city will unravel within days. Looting, gang wars, and starvation are the new reality. Anyone missing their bunker?

Check out: *One Second After* by William R. Forstchen

## #3: CANNIBALISM

It's been twelve months since the EMP detonation. The crop fields are barren. With no manufactured fertilizer, no artificial irrigation, and no mechanical labor, modern agriculture is over. Worse still, the city's supermarkets and private homes have been stripped bare. Marauding gangs of hungry survivors roam the streets. You've only got one decision to make: eat, or be eaten. (Serving suggestion: don't eat the brains or you'll get prion disease.)

Check out: *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy





### #4: STARVATION

It turns out you were a principled vegan before the apocalypse, and no apocalypse is going to change that. With cannibalism off the menu, your only option is to flee the city. You trek to an abandoned, secluded farmhouse and prepare to eke out a grueling subsistence life. Thankfully, you brought that copy of *The Knowledge* with you from the bunker and are swatting up on the Norfolk crop rotation system. Your evenings consist of research about the nitrogen-fixing properties of legumes. Just when you thought survival couldn't get any sexier.

Check out: *The Death of Grass* by John Christopher

### #5: VIRAL PANDEMIC

Ah crap, someone spotted the smoke from your chimney. Another survivor has turned up begging for shelter and a few of your lovely potatoes. You let them in: a) because you were brought up well, and b) because they have a gun. You two settle down and swap campfire tales of the apocalypse. They're obviously psychologically scarred from the past few years, but you're kinda digging their sexy-smoldering vibe. Wait, what's that rash on their arm? They've brought an infection with them! In your scramble

to get away, one of you knocks over a candle. You two are wrestling for the gun while the fire spreads. The whole farmhouse is soon ablaze. The infected guest perishes as the ceiling caves in. You escape outside, watching your sanctuary burn to the ground, and praying you weren't infected too.

Check out: *The Andromeda Strain* by Michael Crichton

### #6: ZOMBIFICATION

You're back on the road, with no place to call home, and you've got through your last potatoes. There's no choice but to raid an abandoned gas station. You're creeping through the gloomy aisles when you notice a streak of blood across the floor ... There's a clang from the row behind you. "Hello?" you call out, drawing your pistol. There's an ominous groan. Like a human with a really bad hangover. Closer inspection reveals a zombie lurking in the shadows. God dammit, you told those city cannibals not to eat the brains. Now they've all mutated into true monsters. Quick, aim for the head!

Check out: *The Girl with All the Gifts* by M. R. Carey

### #7: DEATH BY ALIEN

You race out of the gas station, outpacing the zombie, but disaster strikes: an alien spaceship is hovering overhead. It's not a retro '50s saucer, more of a 21st century drone ship. You've got a sneaking suspicion it was them who detonated the EMP, and now they're here to spank you again. But as the ship touches down, your heart flutters—these aliens are plant-based! Maybe they've come to rescue all of Earth's surviving vegans? That thought is dashed as one of the aliens snatches a passer-by in its tentacles and ingests her for breakfast. Ugh, this is so unfair. Don't they know you drink almond milk?

Check out: *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham

### #8: OLD-SCHOOL INFECTION

The aliens are closing in. You've not washed properly in a year, but that doesn't seem to deter them—if anything, it's added seasoning. Suddenly, a rocket-propelled grenade smashes into their spaceship. A rag-tag band of human rebels are fighting back! The aliens vaporize them in a matter of seconds, but the commotion lasts just long enough for you to make a getaway. However, in your bid to escape, you vault a rusty fence and cut yourself. Over the coming days, the cut becomes infected. Yup, after years of fleeing futuristic threats you're gonna die slowly and miserably from tetanus. All because your anti-vaxxer parents wouldn't let you get the jabs as a kid and you were too lazy as a college student to get it yourself. Karma's a bitch.

Check out: *The Perfect Predator* by Steffanie Strathdee, Thomas Patterson, and Teresa Barker

### #9: FAILED RAID

So, now you're desperate and infected. There's only one way to survive: you gotta go back to the cities and find a pharmacy. You buddy up with another straggler on the road, each making a super-solid pact not to eat each other and enjoying some overdue sexual tension (despite you clearly looking like shit and running a high fever). You two reach the pharmacy, but it's guarded by a gang who are controlling all the supplies. You try bartering with them, but you've got nothing to trade and they chuck you out. So you wait until night time and raid the place. The only problem is: post-apocalyptic law demands that one of your duo dies in a tragic act of self-sacrifice. Will it be you?

Check out: *The Wandering Earth* by Cixin Liu

### #10: BETRAYAL

Not the self-sacrificing type, eh? Fair enough. This is all about surviving the apocalypse, after all. You needed those meds, and the gang was demanding something of value in return. What better than your new friend's organs? The raid is a setup, and the gang captures your companion. Betrayal complete, you schlep off with a bagful of tetanus meds. You make a note to yourself to tell the story differently, if anyone asks what happens.

Check out: *The Quiet at the End of the World* by Lauren James

### SURVIVOR'S GUILT?

Congratulations, you made it through Armageddon alive! All you had to do was compromise every single one of your principles in a brutal, amoral race to the bottom. I hope it was worth it. Enjoy repopulating the Earth with your fellow sociopaths, I'm sure it'll be a really terrific place to visit.



#### About the author

**Marcus Martin** is a bestselling sci-fi author. His post-apocalyptic series *Convulsive* became an international bestseller and won three literary awards. His latest trilogy *People of Change* is a near-future sci-fi thriller with dark humor throughout. His recent standalone works include *Finality*, a metaphysical sci-fi fable exploring mortality in a Gaslamp world. He's currently working on a new near-future trilogy inspired by climate change. For updates, and to read book one in the *Convulsive* series for free, join Marcus's mail list at [marcusmartinauthor.com/books](http://marcusmartinauthor.com/books).





**James Rollins**  
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James Rollins

James Rollins is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Sigma Force series, six individual adventure thrillers, the blockbuster movie novelization *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the Tucker Wayne series, the Order of the Sanguines series, the Jake Ransom middle grade series, and a new debut series, Moonfall Saga. The *Starless Crown* debuts January 4 and the sixteenth Sigma Force adventure, *Kingdom of Bones*, debuts April 19.

**Q. In January, *The Starless Crown* hits shelves. It’s a thrilling fantasy about outcasts, hunted while trying to stave off an apocalypse. When did the idea first come to you?**

**James:** I had this idea for about a decade. I knew I wanted to set a fantasy on a tidally locked planet, where one side was forever facing the sun, while the other side was eternally locked in frozen darkness. Over the years, I’ve slowly built this world: in journals, in scrawled screeds on Post-it notes, even sketchy drawings. At first there was no connection between the varied elements until slowly a girl appeared in my journals. Just a shadow at first, the barest glimpse—the color of her hair, her secret history, the power she would possess. Over time, she evolved into the heart of the story, the one who would make the journey worth traveling. Only after I found her was I ready to bring the story to life, to find the long and winding path through the many lands hidden in my notebooks.

**Q. Did the pandemic impact your process?**

**James:** The lockdown did offer an extended window of introspection and a larger block of writing time. That said, there was also a level of stress that built up due to the confinement. I’m accustomed to getting out into the world to research my thrillers. Even the inability to go out on tour and reconnect to readers takes its toll. I love having that firsthand feedback and interaction that comes from a book tour, something that social media or Zoom meet-ups never fully satisfies. So, I very much look forward to the world opening again. I’ve already updated my passport in anticipation of that.

**Q. Is this the beginning of a fantasy epic?**

**James:** *The Starless Crown* is the first installment of a four-book arc. So, while this first book is a self-contained story with a significant climax, there is still much more to come as Nyx and her companions are forced to venture into those sunblasted regions and frozen wilds of her world, all to try to stop the threat of the world’s moon crashing into the planet. And if that wasn’t trouble enough, she must accomplish this while dealing with a growing war that threatens to blow up into a global conflict. So, Nyx has her work cut out for her.

**Q. Besides being a superlative fiction writer, you keep sharp as a practicing veterinarian. What does that work do for you creatively?**

**James:** My veterinary background played an exceedingly important role in building this story. Due to the wild extremes of landscapes found in this world, I had to give significant attention and thought to the biology and physiology of the creatures that would inhabit these various lands. I certainly leaned on my own education to help with this daunting task, but I also consulted evolutionary biologists and xenobiologists to get their informed input. It’s one of the reasons I like to describe this series as a “scientific” fantasy.

**Q. Often, authors in the upper-tier of genre fiction like yourself will use pseudonyms when shifting between, say, fantasy and thriller fiction. (Rowling/Galbraith, as a classic example.) What enticed you and your publisher to keep the James Rollins brand across your fiction?**

**James:** It’s a poorly kept secret that in my earlier career I wrote both thrillers and fantasies. Back then, as an unestablished author—and with the two genres being published by two different houses—I ended up writing those early fantasies under a pseudonym (“James Clemens”). But two decades later, it seems disingenuous now to try to resurrect Mr. Clemens, when most everyone knows that fellow as James Rollins. Also, I mentioned earlier that I consider this arc to be more of a “scientific fantasy.” This series is less a return to my fantasy roots as it a merging of those two writers of the past. For Rollins’s readers, they’ll recognize my usual fast-paced thrill ride, a story steeped in history, science, and adventure. And for those Clemens fans, they’ll enter a

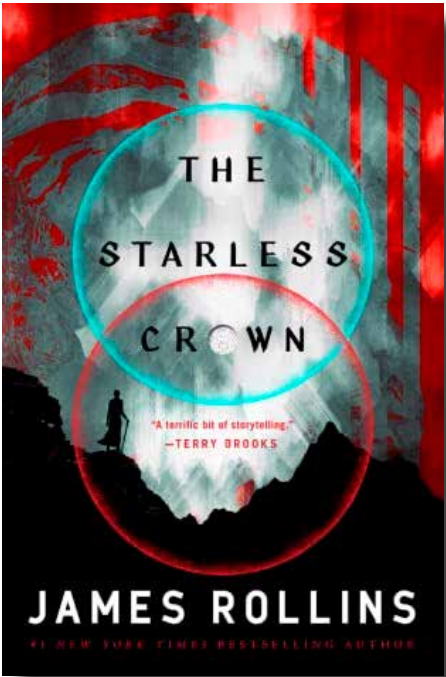
harsh, vibrant world full of wonders and horrors, a landscape as fantastical as ever.

**Q. In our last interview, we discussed caving. Have you been on any adventures recently?**

**James:** Ah, that goes back to the COVID question. With the world locked down, I’ve not had a chance to do any real exploring. I’ve kept up physically and practiced my rope work (and tried to keep my waistline down for squeezing through tight chutes), all in anticipation of the world opening again. And I do miss it. Both for the challenge of it, but also for the wonder. Caving offers the chance to potentially venture into a landscape never seen before by human eyes. With the world so mapped and tracked, the chance to enter a newly discovered cavern is beyond thrilling. Who knows what you might find?

**Q. In your library, you have a chunk of T-rex jaw (next to your signed copy of *Jurassic Park*) as well as a mammoth tusk hanging on the wall. What other unusual artifacts do you own?**

**James:** While I’ve always wanted to be a veterinarian since third grade, second on that list was “archaeologist.” I’ve collected fossils and artifacts throughout my life. And many of those end up in my novels. I have a huge ammonite fossil on my shelf that was the inspiration for the resurrection of that prehistoric creature in my first book, *Subterranean*. Maybe of less historical import, I also have a replica of Indiana Jones’s fedora and whip sitting on a shelf in my library, harkening back to the moment I was tapped to do the novelization of the fourth Indy movie.



James Rollins’s latest: *The Starless Crown*

- A gifted student foretells an apocalypse. Her reward is a sentence of death.
- Fleeing into the unknown she is drawn into a team of outcasts:
- A broken soldier, who once again takes up the weapons he’s forbidden to wield and carves a trail back home.
- A drunken prince, who steps out from his beloved brother’s shadow and claims a purpose of his own.
- An imprisoned thief, who escapes the crushing dark and discovers a gleaming artifact—one that will ignite a power struggle across the globe.
- On the run, hunted by enemies old and new, they must learn to trust each other in order to survive in a world evolved in strange, beautiful, and deadly ways, and uncover ancient secrets that hold the key to their salvation.





# ***Big Thrills in a*** **SMALL TOWN**

Picket fences. Friendly neighbors. What's so scary about that?

BY JENNIFER HARVEY

**T**here's something alluring about a city as the backdrop to a story. Cities are dynamic and enticing, a source of excitement and danger, and all those people crammed together means there is plenty of potential for the unforeseen and unpredictable.

But small towns are equally fascinating places in which to set a story, especially psychological thrillers. Think nothing ever happens in those quiet streets where everybody knows your name? Think again.

In the idealistic small town, all is right with the world. People know one another and watch out for each other. They walk down the streets and greet their neighbors by their first name. They know whose kid is whose and where they go to school. They know which families have a "bad name" and who can be relied upon. And should someone alter their routine without warning, they know to check in on them and make sure everything is okay. In these towns, there is a strong sense of community and a prevailing sense of security. The rule seems to be: you are safe here.

And yet, in a small town, there can be an inexplicable unease. A relative silence that puts you on edge. City dwellers get used to a certain level of background agitation—houses are burgled, cars are stolen, people get drunk and rowdy. Sirens are commonplace and, sometimes, gunshots ring

out in the night. This constant exposure leaves you a little numb. The tension is always there, and so, after a while, you cease to notice it.

But in a small town, there is far less threatening input. Your senses may respond by seeking it out, as if hardwired to be alert to the possibilities of danger, even where none appear to exist. "It must be here somewhere," your brain tells you. And this is when a hidden landscape reveals itself. This is the moment the idealized small town is transformed into something sinister.

Because as in all good fairy tales, there is always a hidden threat. Some malevolent force that seek to undermine and destroy this dreamlike perfection, this safest of havens. In a small town, the threat lurks just below the surface. In a small town, there is an unsettling sense that everything we hold dear can be taken from us if we are not careful. And in a small town, the malevolent forces are often ourselves.

An ideal setting then, for psychological thrillers.

## **NOT-SO-EASY LIVING**

One of the best books in which a small town is used to heighten the sense of disorientation and unease is Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. The opening in particular sets up the suspense wonderfully. There is an almost cinematic quality to the writing as Nick Dunne contemplates the back of



his wife’s head. His thoughts meander as he remembers how lovely he found it when he first saw her. But then something shifts, and almost seamlessly he zooms in and imagines opening her skull and peering in at her brain, “all those coils and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast frantic centipedes.” It’s impossible to read that without shivering.

What is so interesting about this opening is that we get this disconcerting scene first. It’s only a few paragraphs later that we learn Nick’s glamorous, successful life in New York has fallen apart and he has found himself back home, in a small town in Missouri. It’s not surprising Flynn set up the opening this way. In the big city, Nick wouldn’t have had the time or inclination to contemplate the back of his wife’s head. The dynamic pace of his glamorous city life would have demanded too much of his attention.

But things have changed. Now, Nick can get lost in maze of his own thoughts. There’s nothing to distract him from delving deep into the recesses of his wife’s mind. The setting, in many ways, has added an extra dimension to the intrigue and suspense, one which would have been lacking if the story had taken place solely in New York.

In the opening sequence of David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, the picket fence perfection Lynch creates is pushed slightly off kilter by that strange and haunting song, and there is a

disconcerting quality to the images that puts us on high alert. The threat is sensed before it is seen. The lawns of *Blue Velvet* are so lovely, until we zoom in and see all manner of creepy crawlies scuttling in the undergrowth. In *Gone Girl*, the back of a head is something to be admired before we crack it open. All is right with the word. Until it isn’t. The fairy tale is clearly a nightmare.

It’s a fascinating juxtaposition, this idea that it is precisely the apparent tranquility of a small town that provides the tension.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Writers love to create a surface level of normality they can then pick apart by delving deeper. There is something about the intimacy of life in a small town that can easily shift into the claustrophobic. And that claustrophobia can, in turn, shift into something more oppressive and challenging.

A great example of the way a small town can close in on people is in *The Dry* by Jane Harper. The drought-stricken town of Kiewarra is almost a character in itself, brought vividly to life by Harper’s stunning descriptions. But the most fascinating aspect of the setting is the way it forces the main character, Aaron Falk, to confront his past. Having moved to Melbourne, Aaron managed to suppress

the secret that had driven him away from his hometown. But returning to Kiewarra, he cannot escape the simmering tensions and rivalries he left behind. As soon as he arrives home, he finds himself thrown back into these intrigues and petty vendettas. No one in Kiewarra has forgotten his history. Memories are long and grudges long-held, and the peace of mind Arron thought he had achieved through distance and years becomes meaningless.

There is no escape for Aaron. He has to confront things he would rather forget and, in this way, the town itself becomes one of the key drivers of the plot. It’s impossible to imagine this story being told someplace else. Try it. Relocate this story to Melbourne or Sydney. It doesn’t quite work, does it?

The television show *Mare of Easttown* accomplished the same effect, but in a slightly different way. Mare has always lived in Easttown, and she always will. She knows every detail of the people’s lives and, as such, she is well positioned to investigate the murders that take place with sensitivity and a degree of insight an outsider would not have.

Because she belongs to the town, the impact of the murders is very personal. She is emotionally invested because she knows both the victims and the accused. But unlike Aaron in *The Dry*, Mare didn’t flee her hometown to

suppress her past. Rather, she has constructed an impenetrable emotional wall around herself. Because everyone in town knows her story and that she doesn’t want to discuss it, they leave her alone. It is only with the arrival of external characters that Mare finally faces her demons.

Writers have an interesting challenge when it comes to incorporating the setting into both the plot and character development. Some will always be drawn to small towns, or even suburbia, because they love the way it forces them to think a little deeper about the close relationship the inhabitants have with one another. Almost as intimate as family, but without the same ties and loyalties, providing a fascinating extra layer and tension to a story.

So, next time you find yourself in a small town, take a good look around. You never know what may lie just below the surface or beyond that picket fence.



About the author

**Jennifer Harvey** is a Scottish writer now living in Amsterdam. Her short fiction has appeared in various publications in the US, Canada, and the UK. She has been shortlisted for the Bristol Prize and the Bridport Prize and placed third in the University of Sunderland Short Story Award. Her novels have been longlisted for the Bath Novel Award and her radio dramas have also won prizes and commendations from the BBC World Service.

Alongside writing, she is a Resident Reader for *Carve Magazine*, an editor for *Carve Critiques*, and serves as a member of the Editorial Board for *Ellipsis Magazine*. See more at [jenharvey.net](http://jenharvey.net).





**Iris Johansen**  
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author  
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Iris Johansen

Iris Johansen is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Eve Duncan series, which includes *The Face of Deception*, *The Killing Game*, and many more. With her son Roy Johansen, she has coauthored *The Naked Eye*, *Sight Unseen*, *Close Your Eyes*, *Shadow Zone*, *Storm Cycle*, and *Silent Thunder*.

**Q. Your newly released thriller *High Stakes* is a gripping dive into the world of high-stakes gambling. What was your inspiration?**

**Iris:** I'm always interested in different and unusual back-grounds and plot lines. Particularly the ones that give me the opportunity to do research which I always find fascinating. This time I was able to develop characters who knew that world and were able to play their own games of revenge, love, and salvation. In addition, I got to study the games of chance themselves and how the gamblers felt about them. I've always enjoyed my trips to Las Vegas, and it was wonder-ful to revisit a few of those wonderful hotel-casinos.

**Q. What kind of research did you get to do for *High Stakes*?**

**Iris:** I talked to gamblers, of course. Then there are re-search libraries and computers, and word of mouth. Also you'd be surprised how many people you know who have their own experiences and opinions about gambling. It's a very personal enjoyment to many people, and if you sit around with a group talking, you'll often come up with not only interesting stories, but arguments about a particular game or judgment call. Try it. If you look back in history, you can also see how gambling could have been instrumen-tal in the outcome of personal and public events. Gambling has probably been around since before the Neanderthal, and so have the problems and excitement that follow it like a blazing comet. That's why it's such a wonderful fertile subject in which a writer can spin her storytelling!

**Q. As a departure from your usual writing, *High Stakes* is a standalone. Besides the secondary character (who readers will recognize), will we be seeing more of Lara, Maria, or others?**

**Iris:** You're correct, these days it is unusual for me to write a standalone. That's partly because I have such a large family of characters to choose from that it seems natural to let one of them have center stage. They are my old friends, and my fans appear to love them, too. But the characters in *High Stakes* seemed to need something entirely different and fresh to tell their story. It was high drama on many levels, and I had to work hard to give each one of the cha-

racters their own rich personality and background. I don't know if we'll be seeing more of Lara, Maria, and the others in another book. It's entirely possible because they all have stories to tell and they're very strong personalities. But, as usual, I seldom know when a character is going to pop up until the story calls for them. If they call my name, I'll be sure to let you know.

**Q. In June, you released *The Bullet* to wide acclaim. What's next for forensics sculptor Eve Duncan?**

**Iris:** I was so glad that everyone loved *The Bullet* as much as I did! I worked hard to make that particular story fresh and exciting and give the reader (and Eve!) something new and yet a twist that would resolve the story in a special way.

There is always something new for Eve Duncan! I'm in the middle of writing a story that not only makes the ultimate use of her skill as a forensic sculptor, but sends both her and Joe on a stunning adventure that puts them in dire danger on several fronts. I just saw the cover and it's wonderful. So is the title, *A Face To Die For*. Can't wait until it comes out!

**Q. This magazine has interviewed your son, Edgar Award winner and sometimes co-writer, Roy Johansen. What are the joys and frustrations of working with him?**

**Iris:** No frustrations. Roy is a consummate professional and we've written several books together, including the Kendra Michael series that is fast becoming as popular as the Eve Duncan books. Most people don't know that Roy has been writing professionally almost as long as I have. He began his career right out of college when he won a nation-al screenwriting contest sponsored by Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Martin Scorsese. His script, *Murder 101*, was made into a cable film starring Pierce Brosnan, and Roy won an Edgar Award for it. Not a bad way to launch a career! He's written projects for the major studios, and he authored several terrific novels before we started writing together. Roy is endlessly inventive during our writing process, which constantly inspires me to bring my best work to the table. It's definitely a reciprocal process that has been in place since our very first book together.

Of course, with any collaboration there can be disagree-ments, and we've certainly had a few. But we respect each other, and we talk through our differences in a way that always ends up with us finding a solution that results in a better book. Roy just wrote a fantastic thriller, *Killer View*, that will be out early next year, and we've already started working together on our next Kendra Michaels collabora-tion. It's been great fun!



Iris Johansen's latest: *High Stakes*

Logan Tanner is a gambler beyond compare. He owns several casinos and is a legend in the stock market. But he also has a darker and more violent past as an extractor that he thought he'd left behind. But that was before he was drawn into the conflict between two Russian Mafia Mob bosses over Lara Balkon, a musical prodigy whose life is now on the line.

But Lara may hold a winning hand of her own; many have underestimated her because she's a pianist, but she may be better at dealing with bullies than Logan realizes.



# Mystery & Suspense's Best Books of 2022

It's early. Way too early, really, to compile a must-read list for 2022, considering the year hasn't even started yet. Still, there are already a number of big titles announced in the mystery, thriller, horror, crime, and suspense genres that demand our attention.

So, if you're already putting together a reading list for next year, here are ten books you'll want to add to your to-be-read pile.







## Quicksilver

**Dean Koontz**

During a shoot-out at a forlorn dude ranch, Quinn Quicksilver finally meets his destined companions: Bridget Raining, a beauty as gifted in foresight as she is with firearms, and her grandpa Sparky, a romance novelist with an unusual past. Bridget knows what it's like to be Quinn. She's hunted, too. The only way to stay alive is to keep moving.

**Genre:** Suspense

**Publisher:** Thomas & Mercer

**Pub date:** January 25, 2022

**Why it's a must-read book of 2022:**

Dean Koontz is a master of suspense, and this horror-suspense thriller will have readers on the edge of their seats.

## The Golden Couple

**Greer Hendricks & Sarah Pekkanen**

Marissa and Mathew Bishop seem like the golden couple—until Marissa cheats. She wants to repair things, both because she loves her husband and for the sake of their 8-year-old son. After a friend forwards an article about Avery, Marissa takes a chance on this maverick therapist, who lost her license due to controversial methods. When the Bishops glide through Avery's door and Marissa reveals her infidelity, all three are set on a collision course.

**Genre:** Psychological thriller

**Publisher:** St. Martin's Press

**Pub date:** March 8, 2022

**Why it's a must-read book of 2022:**

The cryptic characters in this addictive page-turner will keep readers up well past bedtime.



## City on Fire

**Don Winslow**

Danny Ryan yearns for a more “legit” life and a place in the sun. But as the bloody conflict stacks body on body and brother turns against brother, Danny has to rise above himself. To save the friends he loves like family and the family he has sworn to protect, he becomes a leader, a ruthless strategist, and a master of a treacherous game in which the winners live and the losers die.

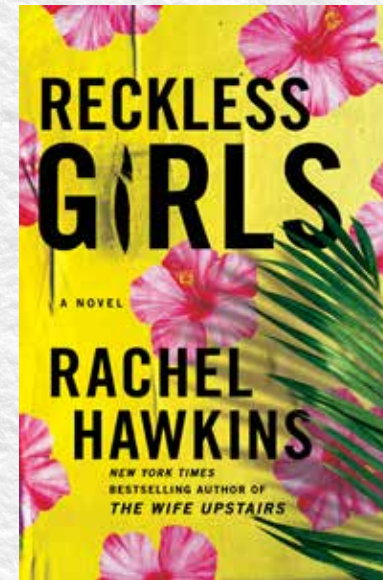
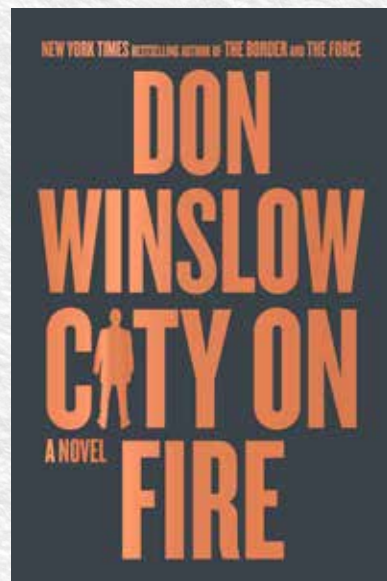
**Genre:** Crime

**Publisher:** William Morrow & Company

**Pub date:** April 26, 2022

**Why it's a must-read book of 2022:**

This is a first book in a new trilogy, from the author of the Cartel series (*The Power of the Dog*, *The Cartel*, and *The Border*).



## Reckless Girls

**Rachel Hawkins**

When Lux and her boyfriend are hired to sail two women to a remote island, it becomes clear that they are even more cut off from civilization than they initially thought. And when one person goes missing, and another turns up dead, Lux begins to wonder if any of them are going to make it off the island alive.

**Genre:** Suspense

**Publisher:** St. Martin's Press

**Pub date:** January 24, 2022

**Why it's a must-read book of 2022:**

From the author of *The Wife Upstairs* comes another suspenseful story readers will want to get their hands on.

## Gwendy's Final Task

**Stephen King & Richard Chizmar**

Evil forces seek to possess the button box and it's up to Senator Gwendy Peterson to keep it from them. At all costs. But where can you hide something from such powerful entities?

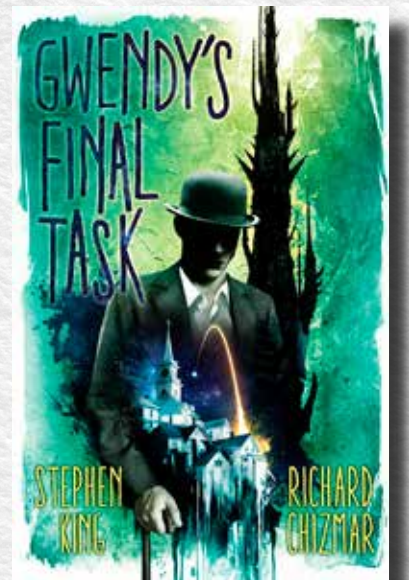
**Genre:** Horror

**Publisher:** Cemetery Dance

**Pub date:** February 15, 2022

**Why it's a must-read book of 2022:**

As far as writing duos, King and Chizmar are the pinnacle. And The Button Box series is horror at its finest.





5

# The Maid

Nita Prose

Molly’s orderly life is turned on its head the day she enters the suite of the infamous and wealthy Charles Black, only to find it in a state of disarray and Mr. Black himself very dead in his bed. Before she knows what’s happening, Molly’s unusual demeanor has the police targeting her as their lead suspect. She quickly finds herself caught in a web of deception, one she has no idea how to untangle.

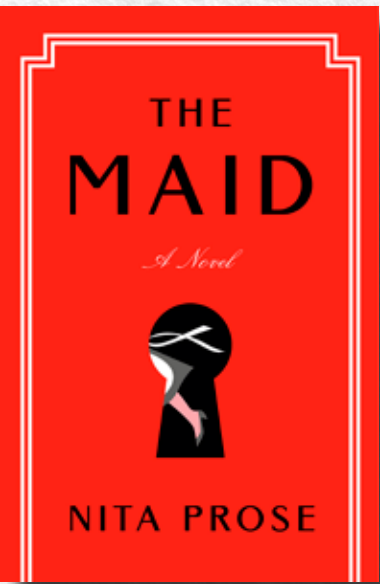
**Genre:** Mystery

**Publisher:** Ballantine Books

**Pub date:** January 4, 2022

**Why it’s a must-read book of 2022:**

Nita Prose is not a household name, but this closed-room mystery is getting major buzz ahead of publication.



# In The Blood

Jack Carr

From over 6,000 miles away, former Navy SEAL James Reece watches the names and pictures of the victims of a terrorist attack on cable news. One face triggers a distant memory of a Mossad operative attached to the CIA years earlier in Iraq—a woman with ties to the intelligence services of two nations ... a woman Reece thought he would never see again.

**Genre:** Thriller

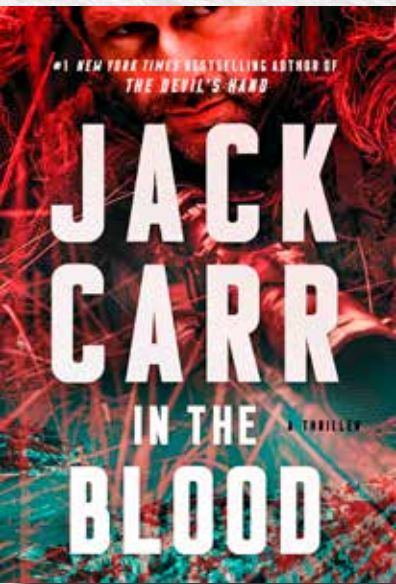
**Publisher:** Atria/Emily Bestler Books

**Pub date:** May 31, 2022

**Why it’s a must-read book of 2022:**

With Chris Pratt starring in the film adaptation of Carr’s *The Terminal List*, this is a series all thriller lovers should follow.

4



2

# The Match

Harlan Coben

As a young child, Wilde was found living a feral existence in the Ramapo mountains of New Jersey. He has grown up knowing nothing of his family, and even less about his own identity. Wilde dives into DNA websites where he becomes caught up in a community of doxxers, a secret group committed to exposing anonymous online trolls. Then one by one these doxxers start to die, and it soon becomes clear that a serial killer is targeting this secret community.

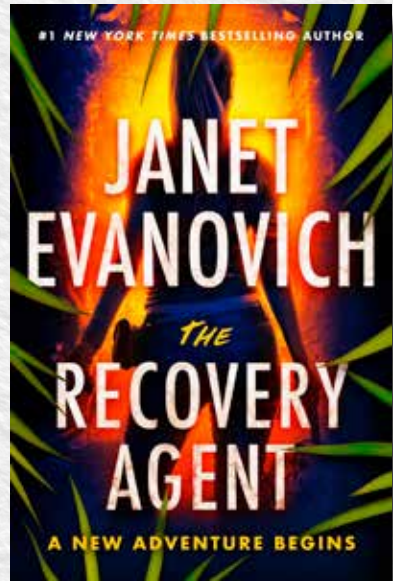
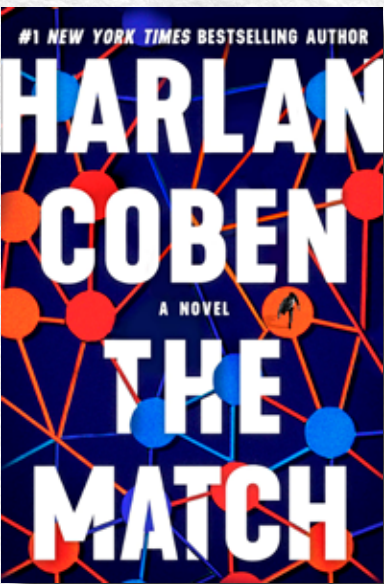
**Genre:** Crime

**Publisher:** Century

**Pub date:** March 17, 2022

**Why it’s a must-read book of 2022:**

No one drops readers into the minds of serial killers like #1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author Harlan Coben.



3

# The Recovery Agent

Janet Evanovich

Lost something? Gabriela Rose knows how to get it back. As a recovery agent, she’s hired by individuals and companies seeking lost treasures, stolen heirlooms, or missing assets of any kind. She’s reliable, cool under pressure, and well trained in weapons of all types. But Gabriela’s latest job isn’t for some bamboozled billionaire—it’s for her own family, whose home is going to be wiped off the map if they can’t come up with a lot of money fast.

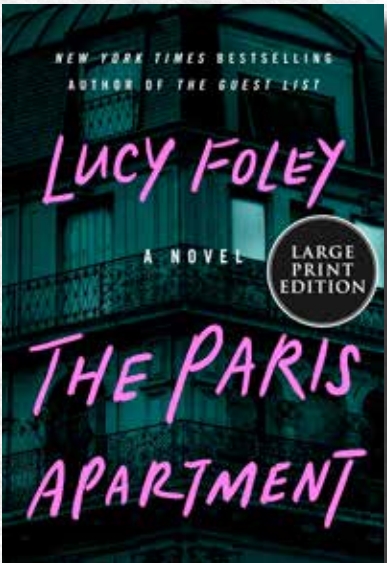
**Genre:** Action Thriller

**Publisher:** Atria Books

**Pub date:** March 22, 2022

**Why it’s a must-read book of 2022:**

The thriller master, Janet Evanovich, has launched a new series. Prepare for twists, action, and one of the best books of the year.



# The Paris Apartment

Lucy Foley

Jess needs a fresh start. She’s broke and alone, and she’s just left her job under less than ideal circumstances. Her half-brother Ben didn’t sound thrilled when she asked if she could crash with him for a bit, but he didn’t say no, and surely everything will look better from Paris. Only when she shows up—to find a very nice apartment, could Ben really have afforded this?—he’s not there.

**Genre:** Mystery

**Publisher:** William Morrow

**Pub date:** February 15, 2022

**Why it’s a must-read book of 2022:**

*The Guest List* was one of the most popular books of 2020. Now Foley is back with another surefire hit on her hands.

1





**Rachel Hawkins**  
New York Times bestselling author of  
the Hex Hall series  
@LadyHawkins  
penguinrandomhouse.com

Rachel Hawkins

Rachel Hawkins is the author of Rebel Belle and the New York Times bestselling series Hex Hall. Born in Virginia and raised in Alabama, Rachel taught high school English for three years before becoming a full-time writer.

**Q. *Reckless Girls* (January 2022, St. Martin’s Press) is the suspenseful story of a vacation-gone-wrong in a deserted island in the South Pacific. For readers who haven’t picked this one up yet, what’s the premise?**

**Rachel:** A young woman and her boyfriend agree to take a pair of friends to a deserted—and fairly creepy— island where they meet another pair of vacationers. What initially seems to be a dream getaway turns dark when an interloper shows up, and we gradually realize no one is quite what they seem.

**Q. *Reckless Girls* is your second gothic thriller, following on the success of *The Wife Upstairs*, notably inspired by Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Was *Reckless Girls* similarly inspired by the classics?**

**Rachel:** There are definitely elements of *And Then There Were None* in there—the island, obviously, the locked room nature of it, the strangers with secrets. I was also inspired by a true crime classic, *And The Sea Will Tell*, that deals with a murder on an island in the South Pacific, and how those remote locations can bring really disparate people together.

**Q. Is it true you’ve always wanted to write an “island” book?**

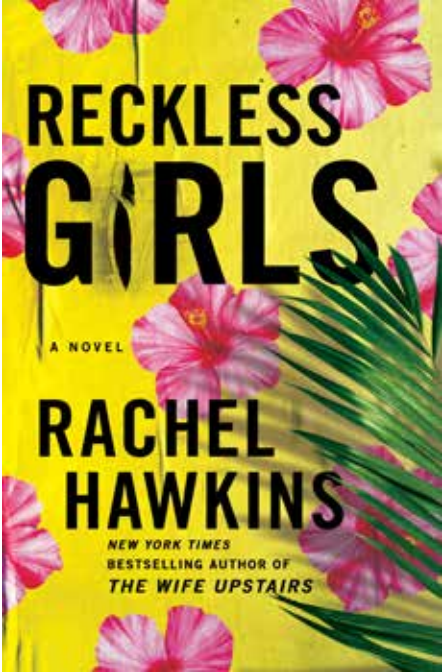
**Rachel:** I’ve always loved boats and the ocean, and I think there’s such good stuff to be mined from these kinds of stories where people are off the grid. There’s a lot of freedom to be found in the open water, but there’s also isolation and a kind of lawlessness that lends itself to telling a really tense and scary story. Plus I’m always fascinated by that idea of, “Who do you become when everything else gets stripped away?” and an island is good for that!

**Q. You started your career as a writer of young adult fiction. What inspired you to move to adult genre fiction?**

**Rachel:** I spent ten years writing YA, and am so grateful for that decade, but it just felt like it was time to try something new. I always want to listen to my gut when it comes to writing, and when I stopped coming up with YA ideas—when it was clear all the stories that really excited me would work best as adult fiction—I knew I needed to pursue that path. And that’s also a big part of what drives me to the next book! When there’s some idea that I just can’t let go of, when I keep turning elements of it over and over in my head, I know that there’s probably a book in there.

**Q. Speaking of the next one, what are you working on now?**

**Rachel:** My next thriller comes out in 2023, and also deals with a Vacation Gone Wrong, but it’s in Italy this time, and involves two best friends who know (or think) they know everything about each other as they spend the summer in a villa that was the scene of a famous murder back in the ’70s. It’s a wild ride, and I can’t wait for people to read it!



Rachel Hawkins’s latest: *Reckless Girls*

When Lux McAllister and her boyfriend, Nico, are hired to sail two women to a remote island in the South Pacific, it seems like the opportunity of a lifetime. Stuck in a dead-end job in Hawaii, and longing to travel the world after a family tragedy, Lux is eager to climb on board *The Susannah* and set out on an adventure. She’s also quick to bond with their passengers, college best friends Brittany and Amma. The two women say they want to travel off the beaten path. But like Lux, they may have other reasons to be seeking an escape.

Shimmering on the horizon after days at sea, Meroe Island is every bit the paradise the foursome expects, despite a mysterious history of shipwrecks, cannibalism, and even rumors of murder. But what they don’t expect is to discover another boat already anchored off Meroe’s sandy beaches. The owners of the *Azure Sky*, Jake and Eliza, are a true golden couple: gorgeous, laidback, and if their sleek catamaran and well-stocked bar are any indication, rich. Now a party of six, the new friends settle in to experience life on an exotic island, and the serenity of being completely off the grid. Lux hasn’t felt like she truly belonged anywhere in years, yet here on Meroe, with these fellow free spirits, she finally has a sense of peace.

But with the arrival of a skeezy stranger sailing alone in pursuit of a darker kind of good time, the balance of the group is disrupted. Soon, cracks begin to emerge: it seems that Brittany and Amma haven’t been completely honest with Lux about their pasts—and perhaps not even with each other. And though Jake and Eliza seem like the perfect pair, the rocky history of their relationship begins to resurface, and their reasons for sailing to Meroe might not be as innocent as they first appeared.

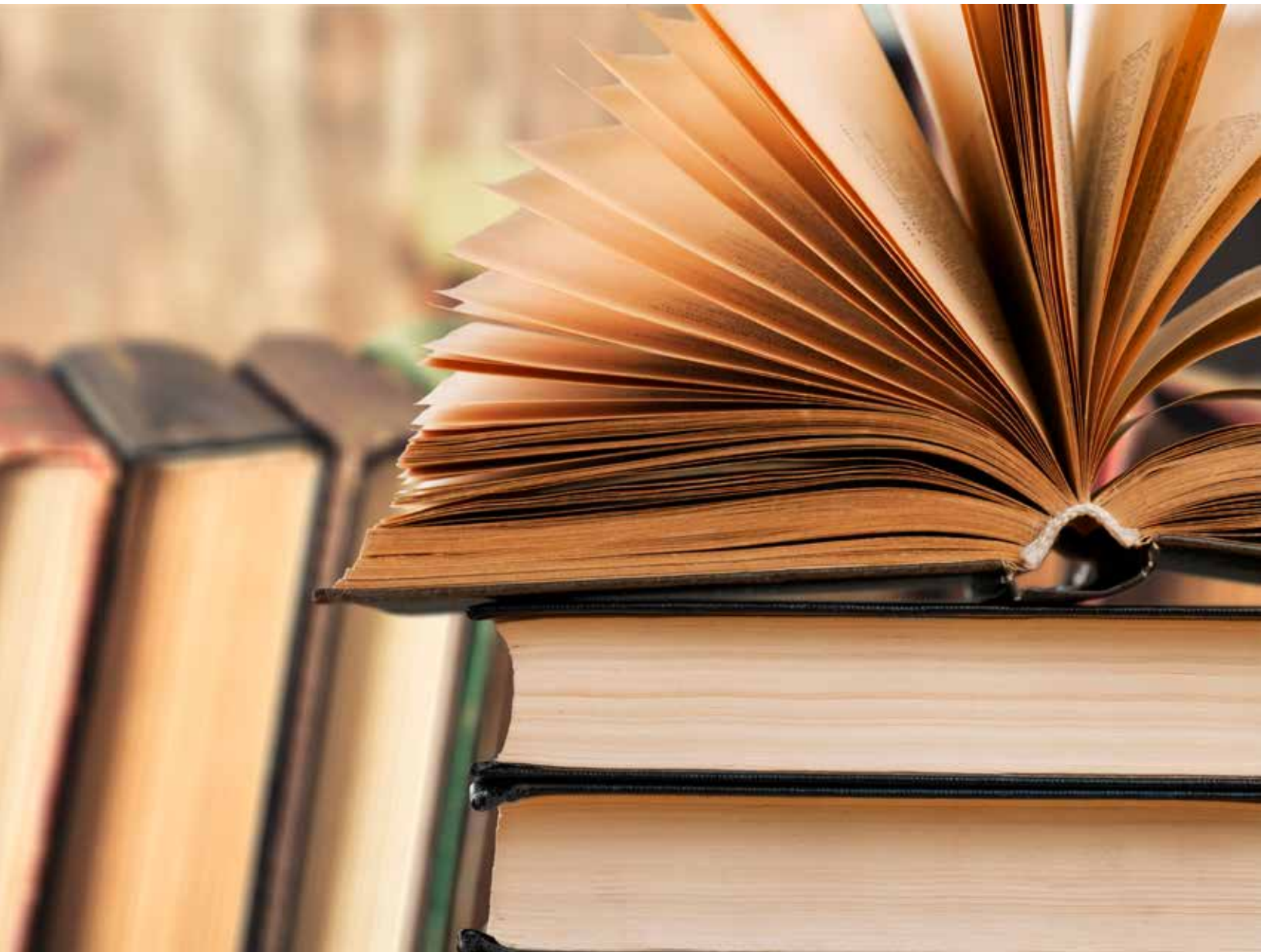
When it becomes clear that the group is even more cut off from civilization than they initially thought, it starts to feel like the island itself is closing in on them. And when one person goes missing, and another turns up dead, Lux begins to wonder if any of them are going to make it off the island alive.



# Thriller Book Club Questions

10 thought-provoking questions to get the most from your discussions

BY JC GATLIN



Is your book club reading a thriller? If so, in addition to a great page-turner and a few bottles of wine, you'll need some thought-provoking questions to ignite the conversation. A successful book club elevates the friendly small talk into an insightful discussion about the book the group agreed to read, and that can be challenging. We've put together a list of questions for your book club to generate a fervent discussion about your thriller.

1. The reader should immediately connect to the main character and be able to identify with him or her. Did you immediately connect to the protagonist? Why or why not?
2. An exhilarating opening chapter sets the pace for the rest of the thriller. Did the opening grab you?
3. How did the setting impact the story? Did you learn anything and would you want to read more books in that setting?
4. Thrillers tend to end chapters with a shocking reveal, confession, or unexpected twist to keep the reader turning the pages. Which cliffhanger or twist surprised you the most?

5. Did the main character make any decisions that you didn't agree with?
6. Thrillers generally have a race-against-time pace that ups the stakes and feeds the reader's adrenaline rush. What was the ticking clock in this book and what would've happened if the protagonist failed?
7. A good villain is a multi-dimensional character with understandable motives, even if they're not justifiable. What are your thoughts about this book's antagonist? Did you feel any sympathy for his or her motives?
8. How long did it take you to read the book? Was there a point where you just couldn't put it down?
9. Are there any plot points that weren't resolved or addressed in the end?
10. A great thriller delivers an epic ending—one that sticks with you for days, if not weeks. Did the conclusion of this book shock or surprise you? Did you feel the book's theme or statement changed after reading the ending?



## 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.



## Cinnamon-Red

BY ADAM GODFREY

Even the buttered ribbons of afternoon sun seemed tainted, laid out across the weeping Pripjat cityscape, peeled and scabbed, a festering wound that never healed. Trees stuffed the vacant land between structures, an untrimmed beard that swallowed what it could to maximum extent, patiently squeezing out, digesting more hearty portions of bygone civilization in a decades-long course. The guide mumbled to the group in a fractured Ukrainian-English code that birthed more questions than answers.

“You’re not supposed to touch anything, asshole,” said Tyler. He hooked his brother’s armpit, urged him upward. “Get up.”

Randy hissed into the breeze, rising from the concrete slab. “Why the fuck are we even here, man?”

“Bud’laska, ne sydit!” The slight guide parted the herd, motioned toward Randy.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m up ... I’m up.”

Tyler lifted a palm, nodded his brother’s apology.

The man fixed his sights on them. “Tut ne bezpechno.”

Randy’s eyes narrowed.

The man shook his head, jarred loose his native tongue, replaced it with something more suitable for unlearned ears. “Not safe here. Not sit, not touch.” He turned away, guided the pack of tourists forward.

“Of all the places, you pick Chernobyl.” Randy squirmed beneath the straps and scoped his surroundings, shifting the backpack into a less sadistic stance. The vegetation ran wild, unchecked across the ruined city, a land out of time, a glimpse into a future when human lungs cease to breathe, nature returning to usher our existence through the gates of oblivion.

“Where’s your sense of adventure, man? Tana’s gone. She’s not coming back and your moping around the house 24/7 isn’t going to change that. So, yeah. I thought this might be a cool trip, something to help knock your balls back into alignment.”

“Jesus.” Randy’s breath drew short, pinned to the back of his throat. His eyes went to liquid and he aimed them to the sky, half saddened, half pissed.

“Shit,” said Tyler, the word’s delivery more breath than speech. Tyler drug the ballcap from his head and swiped a sweat-licked plaster of curls from his brow. He nudged his brother’s arm. “That was fucked. Just want to get you back to you, y’know?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat, looked away. “Look, no worries. I’m good.” It was the closest thing to an apology he was going to get from his brother, but he knew he meant it. He knew he cared. And the truth he kept to himself was that his brother’s shitty comments were often more beneficial than any canned wisdom his therapist pumped into his ears at a rate of three-hundred bucks an hour.

“This it?” Tyler looked around as the crowd dissolved and drained off toward their vehicles, in his preoccupation not realizing the tour had ended and they were standing back at their starting point.

“Thank God.” Randy slapped his palms together, shook them to the sky.

“Dude, no. What? That was the shortest tour ever.”

“We’ve been combing the land between Chernobyl and Pripjat for three days, man. How much more could there be? You see one busted-ass, overgrown Ferris wheel or building, you’ve seen ’em all. I can’t take much more of this



depressing shit.”

“Sir!” Tyler called to the guide, picking up his step, jogging to catch up with his departing backside. “Hey ... is this it?”

The man turned, squinted through smudged lenses, a refraction of light casting rainbows over European cheekbones, set high and sprawling beneath a leathered tarp of spotted flesh.

“Heh? This what?”

Tyler trudged to a stop, breath short on lungs that winced with distant memories of smoke and nicotine. “The tour. Is this it? Anything else?”

“Tour? No, bil’sh nichoho.”

Tyler dropped his head and pushed a hand across his neckline. “Crap.”

Randy plowed near, rolling knots of gravel under disinterested feet. “What?”

“Nothing else. Tour’s over.”

The man eyed the two, wheels turning in the momentary silence, save the notes of birdsong echoing across the infected landscape of concrete and tree, the metronomic tick of the Geiger counter keeping time at the rear of Randy’s pack.

“Vy pokhodyte?” He continued to stare, unblinking. “Hike. You like hike?”

“Ah, yeah, yeah. We hike. I mean,” said Tyler, lifting open palms, “can’t do much at the moment. Don’t have any gear on us right now.”

“No tool, no equipment. Just walk. See nature.” The man smiled, nodded, a shining eagerness on the surface of his eyes. “Good?”

Randy rolled his eyes, turned away.

Tyler waved his hand. “Don’t mind him. He’s heart-broken.”

“The fuck, man ...”

Tyler laughed. “So, this a tour we’re talking about? You guide us?”

“No, no ... no tour. I show you where. Draw map. Lots of pretty plant, tree. No animal.”

“No animals?” Confusion shaped his brow.

“No, animal all live here, in town. In Pripjat.”

“Really ... why?”

The man shrugged. “Prefer shelter? Don’t know. Animal live here instead, not there.” He motioned to the forest beyond town, its edge black from their vantage point, a harsh division between abandoned civilization and dense growth, cut cleanly at the border.

Tyler squinted, scoping the horizon. “Is it the radiation? Is it safe?”

The man’s face lit up. “Is safe, safe! Yes, very safe. Like here.” He dug into his jacket, removing a pen. “Paper? You have?”

“Randy, pass me one of those napkins you grabbed earlier.”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“C’mon, give it.”

Randy shook his head and passed the wad of paper to Tyler. “I’ll be over here when you’re done.” He turned, kicked his way toward the Fiat, dashing pebbles over asphalt, watching the last of their group pull out of the parking area. There were other groups that had also returned from their tours around the same time, more organized and professionally outfitted, complete with guides that spoke near-perfect English. Tyler went cheap, booked theirs through an independent site that guaranteed “good value time,” as if the broken text hadn’t been enough of a red flag.

“Hell yeah, man. We’re doing this.” Tyler jogged over, flagging the white square of napkin in the air.

“If that’s a surrender, I accept.”

“Whatever, man. C’mon, it’ll be great. There’s a trail right up the road. Drew it up on here for us.”

“Look, let’s just head back to the hotel. Relax a bit. We can check it out tomorrow if you’re still just as ate up about it.”

“Nah, let’s go now. It’s right up the road. Tomorrow, we’ll do whatever you want.”

“You know I’m going to hold you to that, right?”

“You’ve been a sporting gal so far, so I owe it to ya.” Tyler kicked Randy from behind, jolting him forward, running to the driver’s side of the car with a grin before the deed was returned. Randy was a fly of a man, something his older brother always took full advantage of, but he was used to it, knocking the dirt from his pants with little more than a screw of the brow. He never bothered to return the deed, and today would be no different. He refused to egg him on.

They traveled northbound for roughly twenty minutes, the claustrophobic squeeze of vegetation against the asphalt edge of roadway increasing until the route was little wider than single-lane, though no other drivers had been spotted since shortly after leaving the tour site.

“Yeah, this ain’t right up the road, man.”

Tyler glanced right. “Yeah, well, don’t shoot the messenger. That’s what the guy told me.”

“Apparently we’re looking to make a left. Hell if I know where th—”

The road bent right and ended, running beneath a ravenous overgrowth of trees and vines as Tyler hit the brakes, fifty-five to zero, breaking the trust of rubber and road as the small car yanked left, right, then stopped, cowering roughly ten feet out from the vanishing point. The two hovered on the adrenal surge, stuttered breaths filling the



tiny cabin as they processed the moment.

“Swear to God, man.” Tyler removed his foot from the brake, cranking the wheel into a hard left in preparation to double back, pausing. “Came out of nowhere. Christ.”

Randy nodded. “Yeah, no shit it did.” He filled his lungs and released. “That it? The one we’re looking for?”

The turn was less road than nature trail, a negative slope that spilled into the oaken tree line, its matted surface adorned with rails of dried mud from countless crossing of tires. This route was narrower still than the one they’d followed thus far, suddenly luxurious by contrast.

Tyler wagged his head, “Least the asshole could’ve warned us about the dead end. Almost goddamned killed us.”

“You parking here or actually taking that trail?” Randy lowered his window, the resistant squeal of glass the only sound aside from the petite engine, a sewing machine’s purr beneath the hood. “Last thing we need’s to get stuck out here.”

“We’ll drive it.” Tyler nudged the gas, pulling the car around and over the asphalt edge, feeling the front end drop to bare earth, lunging over the uneven terrain. “Guy

said it was fine and there’s a spot to park about a half-mile in. We’ll take the trail into the swamps from there.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

“What’s wrong now, Randy?”

“Swamps. You said swamps.”

“Yeah, the beach is closed Wednesdays.” Tyler rolled his eyes, sick of his brother’s incessant bitching. It hadn’t ended since before the plane touched. “What’d you think was over here? You ever read up on geography?”

“Figured it was a normal hike. Woods’n shit.”

“And woods we’ll get. Only in addition to swamps.”

Randy huffed. Though irritated, it was hard to argue against the invigorating breeze that cleansed his mood through the open window as the Fiat jaunted along the path, the lanky slap of weeds pummeling the low-slung undercarriage. Within moments, the trees grew dense, low, choking out the blue sky above as the path tightened further, the wheels of the vehicle raking a vegetative wall of vines and dead limbs as they moved through the arboreal passage.

After a moment, the car stumbled into a grassy clearing, daylight joining them once more, spotlighting a collection





of discarded vehicles, some dissolved into the earth, their metallic shells barely holding shape amid the grass and trees that shared their space. Others were fairly new, yet clearly abandoned in that they were slathered in a blanket of pine needles, tires flaccid, pancaked in the initial stages of creeping rot. Thirty or forty of them, strewn about like metallic corpses, tucked away and forgotten in the remote pocket of land.

“Man, check this out.” Tyler channeled the shifter, killed the engine. He stepped from the vehicle and into the tall grass, lifting his phone to snap several photos.

“Where’d your boy send us, Ty?” Randy walked to the front of the vehicle, casting eyes over the field. “Think this had something to do with the reactor? Old dumping ground, junkyard or something?”

Tyler shrugged. “Can’t be but so old. Reactor blew back in ’86. Check some of these models out here.” He stepped to a 2009 Honda and kicked at the sun-blistered skin of a maroon bumper.

“The guy said levels are safe here though, so we’re good. ‘Sides, we’ve got the counter with us.” He stepped forward, moving through the grass. “Pretty fuckin’ creepy, right?”

Randy didn’t respond, holding his eyes on the forest

ahead.

“See that?” Tyler pointed. “I think that’s our entrance. Right where he said. Told me we’d hit a clearing and the mouth of the trail would be straight on.”

“Yeah, I don’t know, man. There’s something pretty dank about this whole scene. Something’s off.”

“What’re you talking about,” laughed Tyler, stepping toward his brother. “It’s just a hike, man. C’mon. Let’s walk.”

Randy glanced at his brother, then back to the forest.

“C’mon, girl. Want me to hold your hand?” Tyler grinned, reaching out. “Here, take Daddy’s hand.”

“Man, shut up,” laughed Randy, broadening Tyler’s smile in turn. This is why he’d brought them here. To laugh. To be brothers, family. To be free. To find themselves again, find life again. And not just Randy. Tyler, too. He hadn’t mentioned anything to Randy, but there were demons of his own that needed escaping. They’d escape together, he figured. Heal together.

They moved through the mouth of the opposing edge, mounting a carpet of needles, cinnamon-red, heavy underfoot. The lofty hiss of foliage erupted across the towering pines and disappeared into the wooded depths ahead. A sound like ocean’s wrath, exploding high, rushing forward.

The two stayed the path, largely flat, save the occasional dip and surge of earth, root-veined, rippling like flexed muscle. The wind fired again, urgent waves huffed through the treetops, racking skyward branches with the dry clap of bone-on-bone. As suddenly, the movement collapsed, and a tender warmth met them through the growth beyond, crawling their forms. They moved into a gentle sweetness, a note of magnolias and butterscotch on the wind.

Randy closed his eyes, head swimming through memories of childhood bike rides and routes warmed in summer sunlight, roasting savory perfumes from neighborhood blossoms, the raspy note of rubber plucking asphalt.

Tyler looked to his brother, smiling. “Incredible, isn’t it?”

“What is it?”

“Nature, man. The great outdoors.” He bucked Randy with an elbow, jarring him sideways across the path. “This is what it’s all about. One with nature and all that shit.”

“I thought you said this is swampland.”

Tyler shrugged. “It is. Swamps have flowers, too.”

“Better than any flower I’ve ever smelled. Like an oven full of cookies ahead.”

The snap-pause rhythm of the Geiger counter crackled from its position on Randy’s pack, signaling scant amounts of radiation, though well below levels of concern. The rusty pines, more populous now, filtered the final rays of evening along the forest floor, crimson fronds threaded high to low, knitting sky to earth along this forgotten territory, the silence thick, unnatural as they pressed onward.

Another twenty minutes in, they slowed, stopped together, and inspected their surroundings, not so much by sight as sound. Neither spoke.

A flat silence enveloped the land, the substance of bad dreams, mock normalcy, those subtle, critical elements of the real world absent, structurally incomplete, fundamentally unnatural.

Their ears strained, intent.

Not the first whistle, call, chirp of a bird could be heard. They’d not registered the first note the entire time, an unsettling realization between the two of them. Again, the wind simmered in the treetops, back to front, passing one wave after another, dissolving somewhere amongst the distant reach before them. As before, a warmth crept over them, fondling gooseflesh as the sticky-sweet fragrance possessed the air once more. The light had faded, its tone transitioned red to gray, an edge to the twilight air as the passing shot of warmth dissipated, taking their sense of adventure with it. A reticent crackle sounded from the device at Randy’s back.

“Better turn it around, get back before dark.”

Randy bumped and reseated the pack on his shoulder, nodding agreement as they both turned. The path was gone, dense growth ravaging the vacant strip of turf that once occupied the space, impossibly knotted, obstructing all visibility beyond.

The two men spun, regaining bearings, eyes combing the ground in a full circle.

“What the hell is this?” Tyler paced the width of remaining needled pad on which they found themselves, certain he was missing something, a trick of light on weary eyes. He looked to Randy for validation of sanity, finding his brother equally perplexed, now crouched in an effort to shift his vantage point.

“You seeing this, man? Is it just me?” Tyler stared, his eyes begging for correction that wouldn’t come.

“It was right here. We just walked it.” Randy spoke in a flat tone, half submerged in thought, running metrics in his head, a feeble attempt at situational quantification. Eventually, he turned, his wagging head regarding the onward route. “I don’t know what’s going on here, man. The path continues though. I say we walk it. We can’t get through this mess. It’s dense. There’s no way, no way around.”

“So that’s it?” Tyler threw his arms outward. “Just keep walking the damn trail? What the fuck happened to the trail we just fucking walked?”

Randy shook his head, a stupid expression playing on his face as he locked eyes with his brother. It was a question he couldn’t answer. He wasn’t accustomed to being the calmer of the two, a voice of reassurance.

“We keep walking, man. Keep moving. The path is there. Let’s take it forward, see if it loops around, ties into the route back. It’s the best I’ve got. I ... I don’t know what else, man.”

Tyler shifted where he stood, raking the ground of decomposing needles with the edge of his boot. He spun one-eighty again, a final glance to seal his decision. “Yeah. Okay, yeah. We’ll keep on. Let’s go. Let’s move.”

Night settled in with little warning, ink-wet in the Ukrainian wilderness. Cold mist dosed the air, shrinking skin to bone. They moved quickly, sporting twin shafts of light that carved the pitch, parting the dripping black just enough to reveal the trail ahead, outer regions of visibility impenetrable. Their flesh writhed beneath soaked fabric in response to another dose of warmth, magnolia and butterscotch riding the draft, heavy enough to register on tongues that cowered behind the chatter of teeth.

“Something’s wrong here, Ty. Something’s wrong with this place.” Randy spoke through a clenched jaw, fists



clutched center-mass, flashlight angled toward the matted turf ahead.

“It’s going to be fine, man. Just keep ahead. We have to, we’ll stay the night, keep each other warm. Wait for daylight, double back if we have to. We got here, we’ll get back.”

They’d barely stopped speaking when the path broke open, exposing a vast clearing of dead trees, heaped like bones across the field, gray and black in the beams. The two moved slowly, illuminating dark recesses of trunks and burrows as they advanced among the remains.

Tyler moved ahead to lead the way, an older brother’s duty. “This could be the best shelter we’ll find. Get up under some of these trees, cut the wind, wait out the dark. We can’t see shit out here and I’m afraid we’ll—”

A ratcheting sound filled the air, calling from behind as the Geiger counter cried out. Tyler turned and aimed the torch at his little brother, a mannequin in the darkness, frozen still, arms rigid, flashlight downward. A vague blankness marked his face, a sleepy part of lids over vacant eyes. The ratcheting sang louder now, zinging wildly as Randy’s inert body rose from grass to air, suspended at the end of cinnamon-red vines that pulsed and shoved at his backside. The body shuddered as the vines worked, the counter driven to a high whine, spilling to the ground below as the pack slipped free and descended the rigid arm.

“Randy!” Tyler lunged forward, halted at the sound of shucked corn, breaking the air as red tendrils split the flesh from Randy’s body, cast to the earth like discarded clothing. The skinless frame shimmered in the artificial light, vines crawling his form. Tyler fell to his knees, mouth loose with shock, watching as several hundred leaves licked the blood from exposed muscles, cupping, sipping the liquid through their hollow stems.

Tyler’s mind reeled. Tears pooled and fell from vacant eyes that no longer registered what nightmares lay before them. He felt the hit of warm, sticky spray, preceding a numbness that overtook his flesh, muscles, organs. He registered the pressure leaving his knees as his body was hoisted high, eyes thrust to the stars, their sterling wink never more beautiful. The savory sweetness of pheromones filled the air as the vines field-dressed him there in the darkness, an exhibition of rapid evolution, decades in the making. The frenzied ratchet of the Geiger counter shouted its warning from the wet earth below, plugging Tyler’s head as he faded to black.

The clouds collapsed over Dytiatky just past dark, dosing the town in cold rain. The man slid onto the barstool, having escaped the torrents by mere moments. He pulled the wire-framed glasses from his narrow face and

slowly laid them out on the mahogany. The forty-minute drive from the Pripjat tour grounds hadn’t been enough to clear his mind of the last-minute deed.

It never was.

The bartender approached, extending a hand to the man’s shoulder, working the muscle. “YA znayu tsey pohlyad, druzhe.” *I know that look, my friend.*

The man looked up, nodded, eyes wet.

“Vy zabezpechuyete nashu bezpeku, Dmytre. Vy tse znayete, chy ne tak?” *You ensure our safety, Dmitri. You know this, don’t you?* The bartender smiled thinly, poured the vodka. He passed the glass to the man.

“Tse ne polehshuye.” *It doesn’t make it any easier.* Dmitri took the drink whole, striking the empty vessel against wood. “Koly tse zakinchuyet’sya?” *When does it end?*

The bartender pressed a damp towel between hands and leaned forward, leveling his eyes with Dmitri’s. “Tse ne zakinchuyet’sya. Ty znayesh tse. Tse vony abo my. Vy znayete uhotu. My vidpravlyayemo yizhu, vona zalyshayet’sya v lisi. Yakshcho my ts’oho ne зробимо ...”

*It doesn’t end. You know this. It’s them or us. You know the deal. We send them food, keep them satiated, they stay in the forest. If we don’t ...*

Dmitri aimed his eyes downward, nodded, a necessary shame in his core. “Tak, yakshcho my ts’oho ne зробимо ...” *Yes, if we don’t ...*

The big man racked the bar top with a resolute fist, grunting affirmation, righting himself again on the opposite end of the counter. “Inshyy?” *Another?*

“Moya sovist’ strazhdala b bez ts’oho.” *My conscience would suffer without it.*

**Adam Godfrey holds over twenty years of experience working for the United States Department of Defense and has been internationally featured across industry publications in the field of information security. He has authored a number of short stories in the genres of horror and supernatural suspense, and is presently developing his debut sci-fi horror novella, as well as novel-length technothriller.**

**Adam currently lives in Chesapeake, Virginia with his wife and three young daughters. You can follow him on Twitter at @adamfgodfrey.**

## HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WINTER



### You’ll Be The Death of Me

Karen M. McManus

Three friends who have grown apart. A chance to reconnect. A ditch day gone horribly wrong.

In Karen McManus’s *You’ll Be The Death of Me*, three high school seniors reconnect after years of living their own lives. Ivy, the smart and driven runner-up for class president, feels like she will never be as good as her younger brother. He is smart but

a slacker, and Ivy feels like she’s always having to prove herself. Mateo is your typical high school heartthrob, with good looks and a charming personality. He is also working two jobs to take care of his sick mom and try to support his family. Then there is Cal, a friendless outsider who wants to go back and relive one of the best days of his life. When he sees his chance, he drives the trio to Boston for a ditch day.

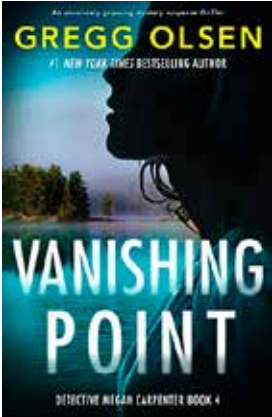
This isn’t just any ditch day, but a day that begins with witnessing a murder. Is it a case of the wrong place at the wrong

time, or do these three have something to hide? What follows is a frantic chase to find out what happened in the abandoned warehouse and who is responsible. But everyone has secrets, and sooner or later, those secrets will come out.

In a similar format to McManus’s other books, *You’ll Be The Death of Me* switches between three perspectives to tell the story. In her signature fun YA plot build, McManus slowly shares details through each of the three narrators, each in a distinctive way and individually relatable. The reader is never sure who to trust, who has hidden motives, and what is really going on in the bigger picture.

With a hint of *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, this story is a fun twist on being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Teen-age gossip and drama is paired with an underlying story full of drugs, affairs, and even a mole spying on everyone. The pacing keeps the plot moving briskly, and the plot is fun and relatable. This is a great read for fans of McManus’s previous books and other YA books like *Five Total Strangers* or *A Good Girl’s Guide to Murder*.

**Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann**



### Vanishing Point

Gregg Olsen

Marlena Parker and her four-year-old son are missing. It is 2 a.m. when Detective Megan Carpenter receives a call from Marlena’s estranged husband, Ben, that he has gone to their house and they are not there. No signs of a struggle. Nothing missing. Ben is the son of Cyrus Parker, one of the richest men in America. Marlena is the niece

of a sheriff in Jefferson County, who is also Megan’s boss.

This is the fourth book in the compulsive, intriguing, and often funny Megan Carpenter series by the amazing Gregg Olsen. Megan is determined to find Marlena and her son with very few clues, a lying husband, and a powerful family. Not to mention a boss who is on top of her at every step to get this solved because of his personal connection.

The pace of *Vanishing Point* moves quickly and is in Megan’s voice throughout. Out of all four books, this one shows the best side of Megan. She is introspective, funny, and

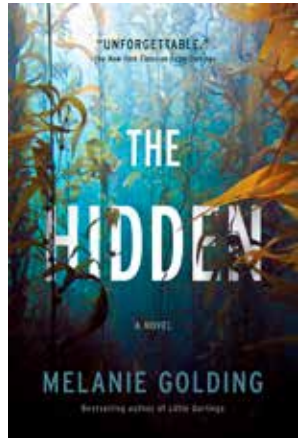
relatable. Readers will learn more about her tough childhood and how it relates to who she is today.

Ronnie Marsh, Megan’s partner, really shines in this book, compared to the last three. She is witty, smart, and makes brilliant decisions. Megan and Ronnie are convinced that Ben is guilty of abduction and, potentially, murder. When interviewing Marlena’s friends and family, Megan finds that Marlena’s relationship with Ben is physically and emotionally abusive. Relating this to her own past, she is determined to find them alive, with or without Ben’s help.

Readers will enjoy other characters in this book, including Marlena’s crazy neighbor, Mrs. Green. As in any standard police procedural, nothing is what it seems, and it is an adventure to find out who has abducted a mother and her young son. Is it Ben, or has someone done a great job of setting him up? There are so many enjoyable twists and turns and interesting characters. Gregg Olsen does not disappoint.

**Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo**





## The Hidden Melanie Golding

Melanie Golding's sophomore novel is like her first, *Little Darlings*: an unconventional blend of psychological thriller, police mystery, and mythology. The intuitive young detective from the first novel, DS Joanna Harper, makes a welcome return as the detective in charge of this case.

In the novel's opening scene, a small girl is found alone on

the street of a small seaside town on the English east coast. The police are called, but shortly afterward a relieved woman appears, claiming to be the child's mother. She tells them the child ran away when her back was turned and she's been looking for her everywhere. Since the little girl clearly knows her, she is eventually allowed to take her and leave, without the police realising she is not the little girl's mother.

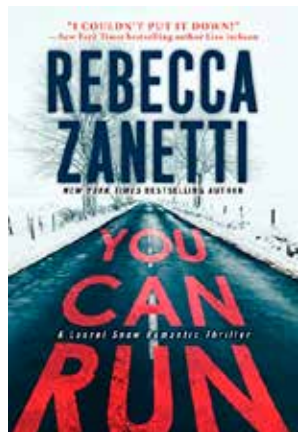
In Sheffield, DS Joanna Harper has been called to an apartment where a man, Gregor Franks, has been found floating in an overflowing bath, beaten and close to death. She discovers a child's cot, clothes and toys in the apartment, but the neighbours have never been aware of anyone else living in the apartment. Why would Gregor keep it a secret?

As she's leaving the scene of the crime, Joanna notices that her estranged sister Ruby's flat is in the building opposite. She hasn't heard from Ruby for quite a while, as she isn't answering her phone, and wonders how she's doing.

Nothing is as it seems in this novel. Relationships are more complex than they appear. A central theme is the enduring bond between mothers and their children.

A slow boiler of a mystery, stratling revelations are gradually released as all the pieces start to slot together. A folklore element blends superbly with the modern day mystery. Highly recommended for readers who enjoy an unusual element in their crime novels.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



## You Can Run Rebecca Zanetti

This crime murder mystery thriller has a bit of romance. FBI Special Agent Laurel Snow is on her way back to Washington, D.C., when she is diverted to her hometown of Genesis Valley, Washington.

Several bodies have been found on Snowblood Peak. Since Laurel specializes in serial killer cases and the Seattle FBI office is tied up with a big

case, she is drawn into the investigation.

As the protagonist, Laurel is reasonably strong, but has some vulnerabilities. She has an eidetic memory and started college when she was 11. With multiple degrees, she has been successful in her career, but doesn't work with a partner and sometimes misses underlying signals from others in social situations. Captain Huck Rivers is the fish and wildlife officer guiding her to the crime scene. He likes rules and routines and doesn't like anything disrupting his schedule. Their attraction to each other is only a small part of the story. He seems to have secrets that may or may not have anything to do with the crimes. He also prefers to work alone.

From her unusual background, to her sometimes atypical reflections as she tries to figure out what game the killer is playing, to her relentless pursuit of justice for the victims, readers will root for Laurel's success. They'll also enjoy the interplay between Laurel and Huck.

A clever plot with enough twists and red herrings to keep a reader guessing is one of several positives in this novel. The pacing and dialogue are great, and the writing is smooth. The suspense builds steadily, and the journey is full of chills that will keep readers on the edge of their seats.

The physical world-building is vivid, giving readers a sense of the cold, ice, and snow pelting the characters. That said, there is one particularly steamy scene.

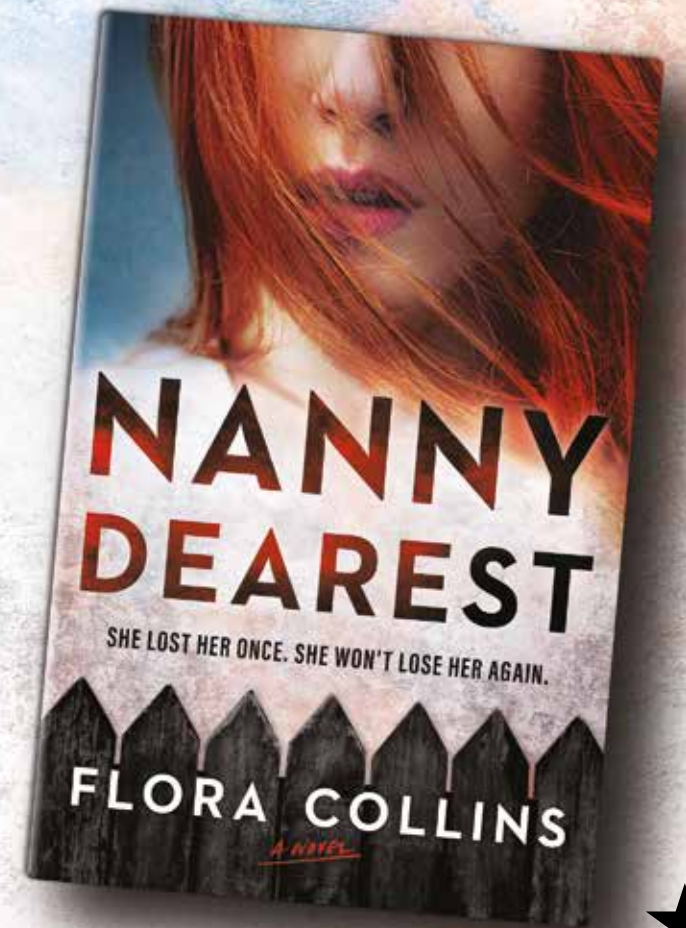
Overall, this is a riveting story with compelling and complex characters that will keep readers fully engaged. It's skillfully written and will appeal to readers who enjoy psychological thrillers and police procedurals involving serial killers. The intricacy of the plot, plus attention to detail in the world-building, makes this a definite winner. Readers will look forward to future books in the series, as there are relationships to be explored with family, friends, and colleagues.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

A young woman takes comfort in reconnecting with her childhood nanny, until she starts to uncover secrets the nanny has been holding for twenty years.

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## Seat 7A

Sebastian Fitzek

When a man boards a plane, he plans to see his daughter give birth. However, someone else has another plan, as the man is coerced to ensure that either the plane goes down or his daughter dies. Which to choose? Fitzek, at his best, keeps the reader wondering throughout.

Mats Krüger may be a well-known psychologist, but even he has his secrets. Having fled his native Germany after the death of his wife, Krüger has agreed to return to witness the birth of his first grandchild. Living in Argentina now, Krüger will have to fly around the world to arrive on time. This would not be an issue if he weren't terrified of flying. Krüger's willing to make the sacrifice, with a few failsafes in place.

After crunching the numbers, Krüger learns the safest seat on the plane and chooses to purchase that one. His desire to protect others has him also obtain seat 7A, statistically the most dangerous one on the flight, thereby ensuring no one else can have it. Everything seems destined to work,

and he makes his way on board.

While the flight is in the air, Krüger's daughter, Nele, is kidnapped in Berlin and held by a deranged man with a twisted sense of retribution. Krüger's made aware of this in-flight and given an ultimatum: crash the plane or Nele dies. As Krüger comes to terms with this choice, he learns there are others on board from his past, including one whose stability could teeter with one wrong move. Krüger will have to decide who matters more, Nele or a plane full of innocent passengers.

Fitzek delivers a fast narrative and plot development. Pushing the protagonist (and the reader) to the brink works well for Fitzek, as he is always able to bring out stunning twists to keep the story alive.

Mats Krüger did well as the protagonist, working through many of his own issues to help the larger public. There is substantial backstory presented throughout, as well as some harrowing development on board this massive jetliner bound for Germany. Krüger must show this true color, as well as use his psychological skills to assess the situation, all while trying to save his daughter and unborn grandchild.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



## The Other Me

Sarah Zachrich Jeng

In one moment Kelly, is living her best life in Chicago as an artist, celebrating her birthday. As she goes through the door of her best friend's art show, she finds herself entering her hometown in Michigan. Here, her life is unrecognizable, as she never left for Chicago to go to art school. She's married to Eric, a guy she barely knew in high school,

and together, they live in the suburbs.

"Everything I learned at art school about how to translate my vision into something tangible—knowledge that had become second nature—is in my brain. I can feel it, just beyond my reach. Normally it surrounds me like the air I breathe, but now when I try to grasp at it, it becomes smoke."

She frantically tries to get back to her own life, racing against an unknown amount of time and afraid she will be stuck in this life forever. Kelly drives back to Chicago, but soon realizes nothing is the same and no one recognizes her.

She comes to the conclusion that she is not crazy and this is really happening. Not only has her life completely altered, but her own reality begins to shift, making things a bit more complicated.

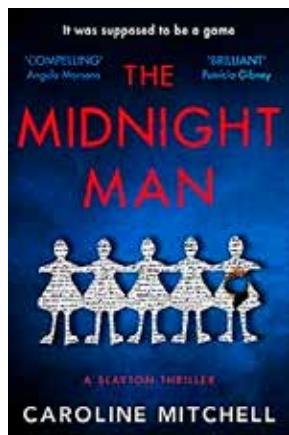
"I need to find out what happened to me. To know for sure if this is real or all in my head. And if it's real, then I want to know who did it to me."

This version of herself is supposedly in love with Eric, so she decides to trust him and see what she can find out. Eric begins to act a little odd and nervous, which only confuses Kelly more. Strange things keep happening around her, too, such as the past being rewritten and warping her memories, her tattoos disappearing, and everyone she meets possibly being the one who knows what happened to her.

Well written and engaging, *The Other Me* will surely surprise readers till the end. Though this is a mystery thriller, the author adds some elements of science fiction, giving the story a refreshing twist. Recommended for fans of Blake Crouch and anyone interested in the concept of alternative lives.

Reviewed by Sheena Alizadeh





## The Midnight Man

Caroline Mitchell

*If you open your door to the  
Midnight Man,*

*Hide with a candle  
wherever you can.*

*Try not to scream  
as he draws near,*

*Because one of you  
won't be leaving here ...*

The Midnight Game has become a tradition for teenagers to play at Halloween in the small town of Slayton. A select group is "invited" to play by sneaking into a creepy, derelict house before midnight and following a set of instructions to invite in the Midnight Man at the stroke of midnight. Each player then lights a candle so they can explore the house. But if the candle goes out, it means the Midnight Man is near, and one of you could die.

In 2019, five teenage schoolgirls receive this invitation. But only four of them will go home again.

Detective Sarah Noble, just returned to work after a year's leave, has been assigned a desk job to ease her back into

work. The rest of the team are less than welcoming, resenting her for being away for so long, and are reluctant to involve her in the investigation of the missing girl. However, Sarah knows more about Blackhall Manor than anyone else in Slayton. She knows what happened there twenty-five years ago on Halloween and why the house has never been lived in since. It's something she's been trying to forget all her life, but now she'll have to face her worst nightmares if the Midnight Man is to be stopped.

This atmospheric, suspenseful novel is a combination of police thriller and horror story with a touch of the supernatural. It's an intense and spine-chilling read. Blackhall Manor is the perfect gloomy, ruined mansion for the creepy game. Like every small town, Slayton has its secrets and odd characters, like Christian, who is at the beck and call of his obese mother, and Elliot, the psychic young boy who has nightmares about the Midnight Man.

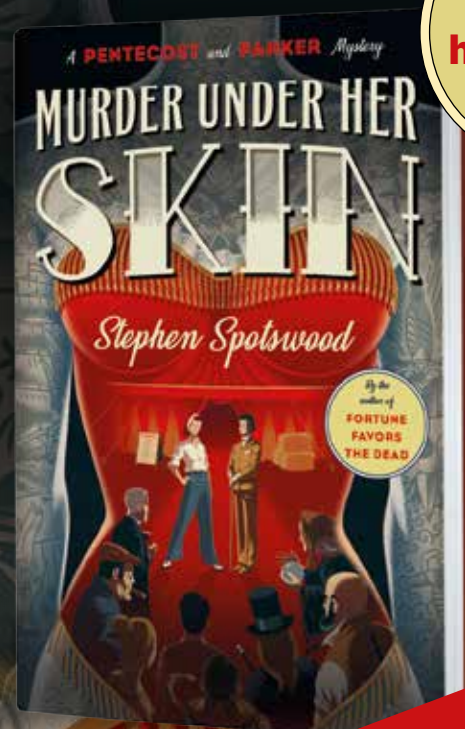
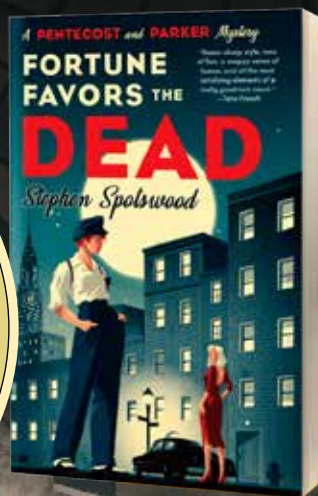
The journey is well worth the ride, especially for readers who enjoy the thrills of a good horror story. It's perfect for reading on a cold, dark winter's night.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott

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