

# MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

N°06 - SPRING 2022  
\$4.99

MAGAZINE

## WOMEN OF FEMME NOIR



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**Feature:** Psychic Sleuth Teams

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**Author Q&A:** Jack Carr, Janet Evanovich, and more

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**Feature:** In Defense of Unlikeable Characters

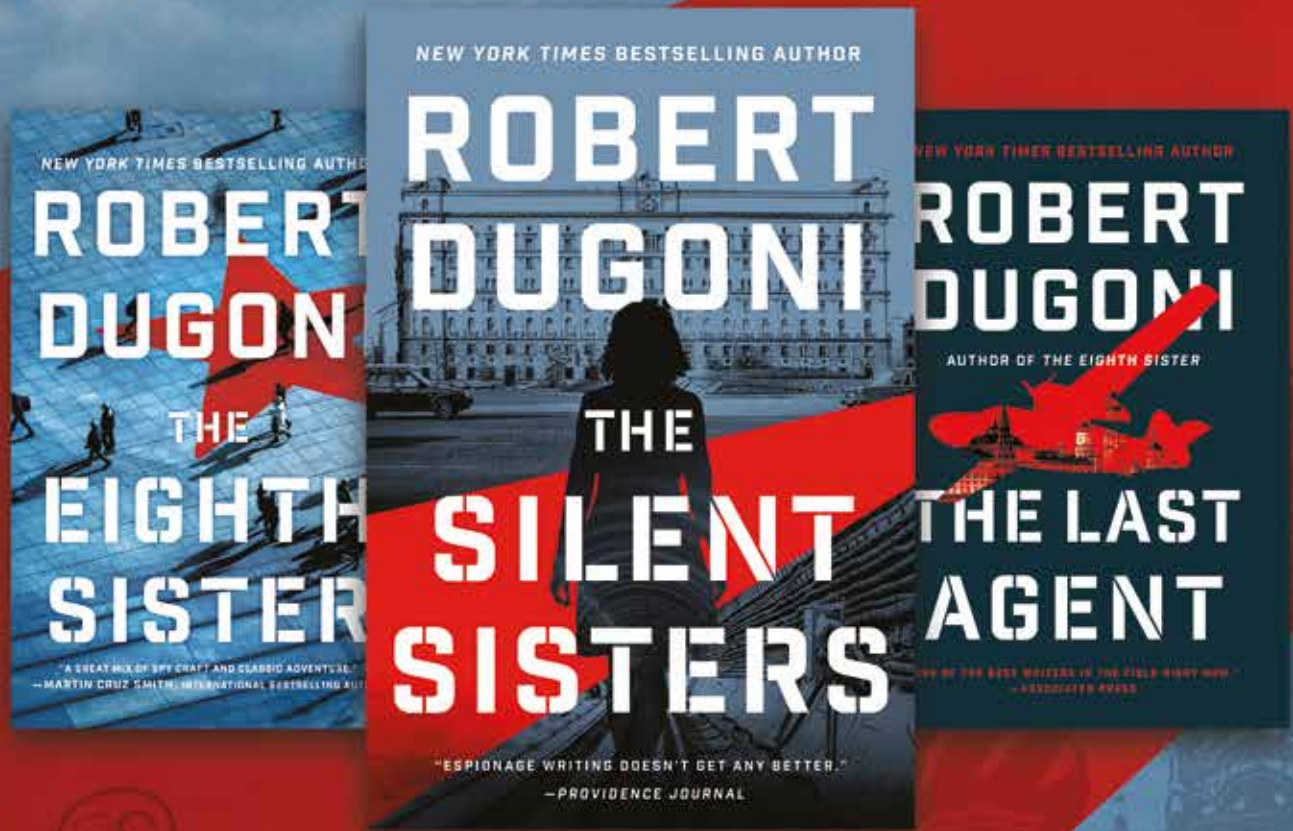
.....  
**Short Fiction:** "The Four-Hundred-Yard Cage"

.....  
**Reviews:** *The Investigator*, *One Step Too Far*, and more

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-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY  
[STARRED REVIEW]



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Now that we have some space to stretch out, make sure to pack along one of spring's great new reads.



Sam Boush  
Editor-in-Chief

Though 2022 is already well underway, spring feels like a sort of kickoff for the year. And what a year it's going to be! From a fiction standpoint, there's so much great stuff hitting the shelves this year, as you'll see if you dive into our reviews, features, and interviews with the likes of Jack Carr, Sarah Pekkanen, Greer Hendricks, Stephen Hunter, and Janet Evanovich.

But this spring just feels bigger than the mysteries, thrillers, crime, horror, and suspense that's filling bookshops and bookcases. It feels like we might just have a little space to stretch out. To breathe. To go on a long hike, a ski trip, or just a trip to that coffee shop we haven't visited for a couple years.

And whether it's a camping spot or a coffee shop I'm visiting, I know I'll be packing along one of the terrific new titles this spring has to offer.

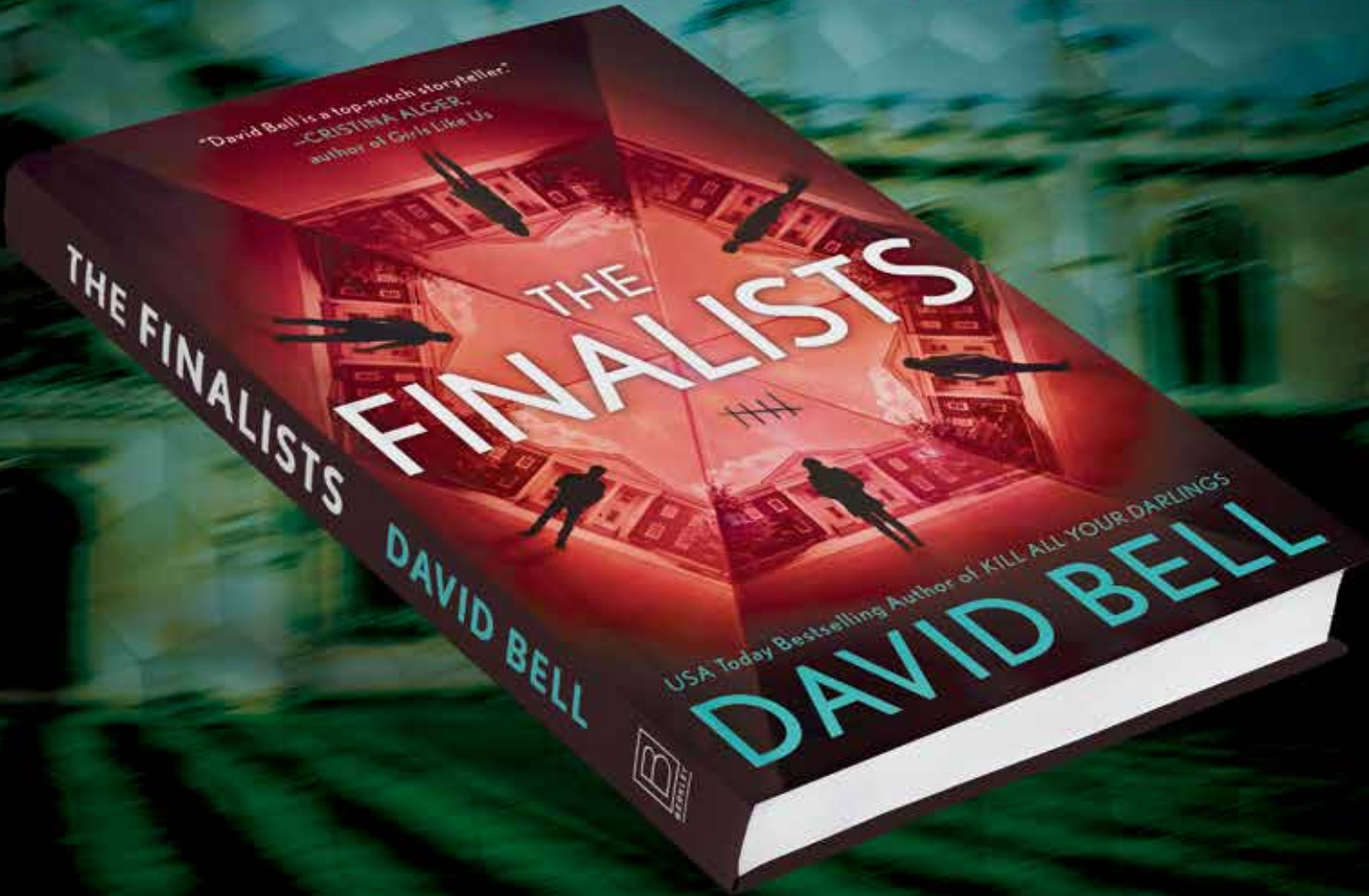
All the best,  
Sam

**Mystery & Suspense Magazine**  
Portland, Oregon  
MysteryandSuspense.com  
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**Jack Carr**  
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Jack Carr

Jack Carr is a former Navy SEAL who led special operations teams as a Team Leader, Platoon Commander, Troop Commander and Task Unit Commander. After twenty years of service, Jack retired from active duty in 2016. He lives with his wife and three children in Park City, Utah. He is the author of *The Terminal List*, *True Believer*, *Savage Son*, and *In The Blood*.

**Q. Book 5 in your Terminal List series, *In the Blood*, is slated for a late March 2022 release. How do you keep the story fresh?**

**Jack:** I am a lifelong fan and student of the thriller genre, so I am not worried about running out of ideas. I am also a lifelong student of warfare in both theory and practice, which gives me a solid foundation from which to anticipate over the horizon threats based on what our enemies are learning about us. I keep the stories fresh by incorporating themes, characters, tactics, and strategies that interest and fascinate me. I know I am on the right path if I am as excited to write it as I am to read it and if I get emotional doing both. It's all about heart.

**Q. What geopolitical events inspired *In the Blood*?**

**Jack:** *In the Blood* gets personal, so readers can expect Navy SEAL Sniper James Reece to be on the hunt for reasons tied to events in previous novels. I call it “a novel of violent resolutions.” I’ve also incorporated current events in Africa, Israel, and Russia along with research into quantum computing, mobile phones, the Internet of Things, and government surveillance. What I learned made me want to move to a cabin in the woods and never touch an electronic device ever again.

**Q. Is your protagonist, Lieutenant Commander James Reece, inspired by anyone? How did you develop him, and how has he developed over the series?**

**Jack:** As with each of us as humans, James Reece will evolve over time. We are all on a journey and get one ride on this planet. James Reece is no different. In the first novel (SPOILER ALERT) he thinks he is dying, which frees him up to become an insurgent on home soil. When he (SPOILER ALERT) discovers he is not dying in the second novel, he has to learn to live again. He needs to find his next mission. How did I develop him? Well, we share a similar background, which allows me to explore different real-world situations I was involved in and take the feelings associated with those experiences and apply them to a completely fictional narrative. If the emotions I associate with him in the novels seem authentic, that’s because they come from a real place.

**Q. Brad Thor helped you get your start. What’s the story there?**

**Jack:** A SEAL buddy who had left the military for the world of finance sat next to Brad at a fundraiser years back. This friend knew I was planning to leave the military and that I

was about four months into writing *The Terminal List*. He reached out and connected me with Brad, who he had helped with some of the SEAL-specific portions of his novels.

Brad and I had a great conversation, but it was like a job interview as he wanted to know why I was writing. We discussed how I grew up loving the genre, that my mom was a librarian, and how I always knew I would one day write thrillers when I left the military.

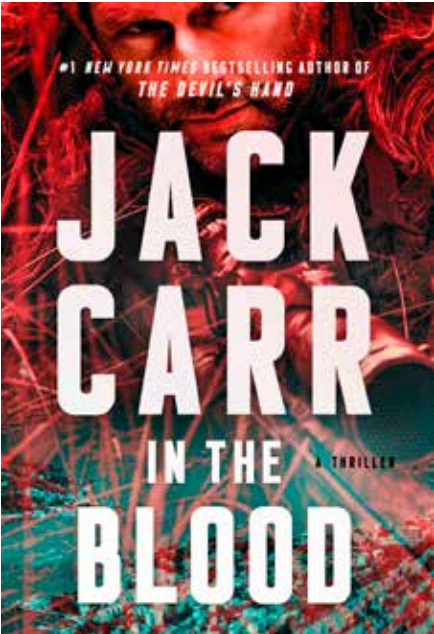
I think he realized that I was writing for all the right reasons. He told me that my friend had told him a few things that I had done in the SEAL Teams, and he said, as a thank you for that, “If you write a book, and if you finish this thing, I can let my publisher know it’s coming. Now, I can’t guarantee they’ll look at it. I can’t guarantee they’re going to read one word of it. And I definitely can’t guarantee that they’re going to like it if they do read it. Don’t call me, don’t ask me questions, don’t ask me for advice, don’t send me chapters because I won’t read them BUT when you’re completely done, tell me, and I’ll let them know that it’s coming.”

Then he asked me when I was going to be finished, and I said, “One year from today,” and he said to call him back then.

So, I marked it down on the calendar, and one year from that day, I called him back. He picked up, and I told him it was done. He asked, “Is it as good as you can possibly make it?” and I told him that it was done, but that I could probably tweak it a little bit more here and there. He told me to call back again when it was as good as I could possibly make it. So I took another four months, making it as good as I could possibly make it. Then I called him back and said, “It’s as good as I can possibly make it. Let’s do it.”

Brad sent it to New York, and it turns out they did open it, and Emily Bestler, who is Brad’s editor and was Vince Flynn’s editor, did read it, and she loved it.

Brad called me after Emily told him she wanted to publish it. I pulled over on the side of the road when I saw the call come in. He told me that I’d just been struck by lightning. I’ll never forget it.



Jack Carr’s latest: *In the Blood*

A woman boards a plane in the African country of Burkina Faso having just completed a targeted assassination for the state of Israel. Two minutes later, her plane is blown out of the sky.

Over 6,000 miles away, former Navy SEAL James Reece watches the names and pictures of the victims 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.

Reece enlists friends new and old across the globe to track down her killer, unaware that he may be walking into a deadly trap.

**Q. What made you want to write thrillers?**

**Jack:** I have wanted to write since my earliest days. My mom was a librarian, so I grew up surrounded by books and with a love of reading. In about fifth grade I began to read the books my parents were reading. That was the year Tom Clancy’s *The Hunt For Red October* came out. I quickly discovered and read everything I could find by David Morrell, Nelson DeMille, A.J. Quinnell, Marc Olden, J.C. Pollock, Louis L’Amour, Frederick Forsyth, Jack Higgins, Ken Follett, Ian Fleming, Clive Cussler, and James Grady. My mom introduced me to Joseph Campbell through a series of interviews he did with Bill Moyers called “The Power of Myth.” His *Hero With A Thousand Faces* was and continues to be a huge influence. Later I’d find Stephen Hunter, Daniel Silva, Vince Flynn, Brad Thor, Stephen Pressfield, Kyle Mills, and Mark Greaney. I could not have had better professors in the art of storytelling.

**Q. The TV series based on your hit debut, *The Terminal List*, is scheduled for an early 2022 release from Amazon Prime Video. How have you been involved in the production? What was your reaction when you learned Chris Pratt would play James Reece?**

**Jack:** I thought of Chris Pratt playing James Reece as I was writing *The Terminal List* and I thought of Antoine Fuqua directing, so to have Chris and Antoine bringing James Reece and *The Terminal List* to life is nothing short of amazing! We are all executive producers on the show and I have been an advisor on all the scripts. I have learned a ton about screenwriting and production over the past two years. The cast and crew knocked it out of the park. I can’t wait to get it out there in the wild!

**Q What’s next?**

**Jack:** There are quite a few projects in the works, some of which remain classified. My “Danger Close” podcast is going strong, and I can share that I will start work on the sixth James Reece thriller on January 1, 2022. What is it about? *In The Blood* offers some clues...



# PSYCHIC SLEUTH TEAMS

Without warning, a vision of the future flashes before your eyes. It's you. With a book in your hand. Here are five outstanding mystery novels about psychics doing what they do best—together.

BY ELLE WREN BURKE

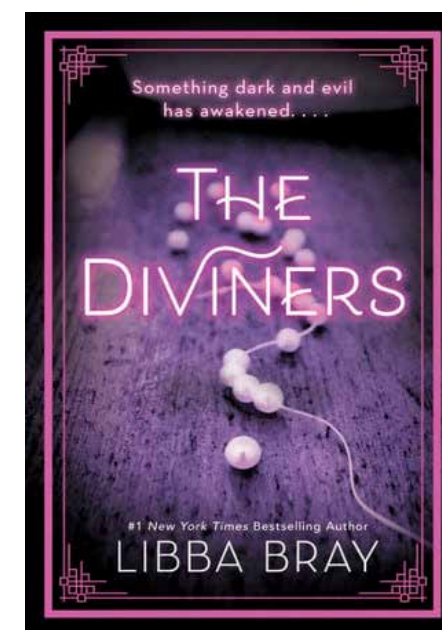
For many people, when we think of psychics, we picture a woman covered in colorful rings and shawls sitting in front of a crystal ball or a late-night TV hotline promising to tell you your future. But we rarely see these kinds of psychics in mysteries.

Instead, we see regular people gifted with abilities we all wish we had ourselves. We want to talk to our dead loved ones, we want to know our futures, we want to know what our aloof spouse is thinking. Especially when something tragic and mysterious happens, we want to know the unknowable—even when the rational laws of the universe tell us it isn't possible. We want to believe that if we can't know, someone out there can. Enter the psychic sleuth.

But the role of a psychic in a mystery is a strange one. The author has to limit their psychic abilities, or else the

mystery would be solved right on page one. An all-knowing psychic wouldn't be a very exciting read, so authors narrow their characters' gifts. Maybe they have random, incomplete visions of the future. Maybe they can read an object's history, but see no further beyond the object. Maybe they can communicate with the dead, but only when the dead are willing. So, the psychic sleuth is impeded, unable to see the whole crime. They must use other methods to solve the mystery. Some authors equip their psychic characters with standard detection tools to assist them, while others like to bring in additional psychic characters with varied abilities to help the main sleuth. The psychics can then combine their various abilities in order to see the whole picture.

The below five mystery and suspense books take this approach, weaving tales of multiple psychics coming together to solve the mystery.



## The Diviners

Libba Bray

Libba Bray brings the reader to New York City during the spiritualist craze of the 1920s. We meet 17-year-old Evie O'Neill, who has the unique ability to read the history of objects, which she showcases as a party trick. As punishment for her careless revelry, Evie's parents force her to move in with her Uncle Will, who runs a museum of the occult. Evie is determined to have the time of her life, but instead, she becomes wrapped up in a sinister murder mystery when Will is asked to consult on the case. As more bodies are found, it becomes clear that dark forces are involved in the ritualistic killings, including a peculiar church with curious goings-on. There's also a connection to a past case involving an executed murderer named Naughty John.

Evie's ability proves invaluable during the investigation, but she can't do it alone. She finds herself encountering other young folks who have similar supernatural talents, including the gift of psychic sight, the capacity to heal others, and the ability to move around unseen. As the story progresses, Evie and her friends must discover if there's a copycat killer afoot, or if Naughty John himself has come back to haunt NYC once again. Meanwhile, the nature of the Diviners themselves is under suspicion. Who are these gifted individuals? And does Uncle Will know more than he's saying about their origins?

*The Diviners* is the first in a four-book series.





## Dark and Shallow Lies

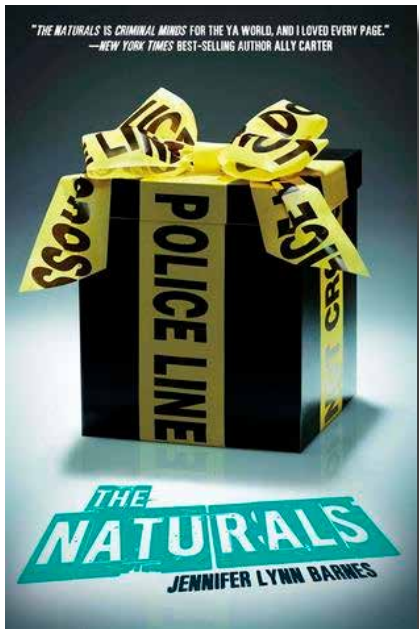
**Ginny Myers Sain**

Ginny Myers Sain weaves a spellbinding, addictive mystery set in the “Psychic Capital of the World.” The small town of La Cachette, Louisiana, is unlike any other town. It is filled with psychics with varying abilities, ready to take cash from tourists in exchange for their perceptions. But the town has a dark history. Six months ago, Grey’s best friend and soul sister Elora disappeared. Elora and Grey are part of an unusual group of ten kids—The Summer Children—all born during the same summer seventeen years ago. Two of the group, a set of twin girls, were murdered when they were children, and now Elora is gone, leaving only seven left.

Grey lives in Arkansas now, but is back in La Cachette for the summer and determined to find out what happened to Elora. Grey has always been the only one of The Summer Children without any psychic abilities, but now she’s started having visions and she’s finding that everyone around her has something to hide, even her own grandmother. With the help of a secret outsider living in the bayou, Grey starts to uncover the town’s secrets and begins to wonder if what happened to Elora could be connected to the town’s sordid history of violence, including the twins’ murder thirteen years ago.

Grey is reluctant to push her friends into talking about their own, often painful, psychic experiences, nor does she want to discuss her visions, so she gathers the bits and pieces of the puzzle slowly over the course of the book.

From psychic artistry to feeling the emotions of others, no one in La Cachette escapes unscathed by their gifts. As Grey tries to solve the mystery, Myers Sain explores the powerful influence of psychic abilities on the psyche of each character as well as the little town around them, making the reader wonder if some things are better left unknown.



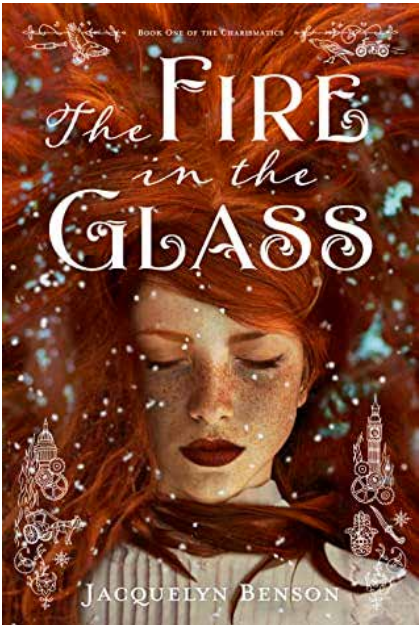
## The Naturals

**Jennifer Lynn Barnes**

This is a quick, easy young-adult read about an FBI experiment that trains a group of teens known as Naturals. The author doesn’t refer to the teens as psychic, but each one has an unexplained natural ability. There’s Lia, the human lie detector; Michael, who can read emotions; Sloane, who can process data and patterns in her head; and Dean and Cassie, the profilers, who can read people, instantly understanding the what and why of human behavior. The teens are recruited by two FBI agents to use their special abilities to work on cold cases, grooming them to one day work on live cases.

Cassie is the newest recruit and the main character. While her profiling ability is natural, her mother taught her to hone her skills from a young age. But when Cassie was twelve, her mother mysteriously disappeared and is presumed dead. Her mother’s own cold case draws Cassie to the FBI program. Shortly after she joins, a serial killer with a personal stake starts murdering women who look very similar to Cassie’s mother. The teens are ordered not to investigate the new string of murders, and to instead keep working on cold cases. But how can Cassie stay out of it when the killer is calling to her? With the help of the other Naturals and their abilities, Cassie is determined to keep investigating the case.

*The Naturals* is the first in a four-book series.



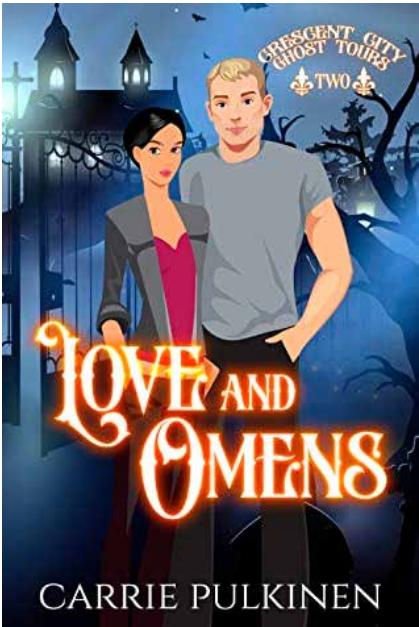
## The Fire in the Glass

**Jacquelyn Benson**

In this historical mystery, Jacquelyn Benson takes us to 1914 London, where Miss Lily Albright is tormented by visions of the future that she has not been able to prevent, no matter how hard she tries—even her own mother’s death. Now, there’s a gruesome killer stalking women who claim to be psychic mediums, and Lily has a vision that her friend will soon be next. Lily decides to investigate the killings, hoping to thwart her vision even if she’s never been able to do so before.

Lily has always assumed she was alone in her abilities, believing self-proclaimed mediums to be a sham, until she meets the mysterious Mr. Ash. He gives Lily an open invitation to The Refuge, a gathering place for charismatics—gifted individuals like herself. Lily resists his offer, but as the killer strikes again, she quickly learns she cannot find the killer alone. Lily keeps crossing paths with Lord Strangford, a withdrawn, solitary man who appears to have his own unique ability. A tether connects Lily and Strangford, pulling them together, but they each have their own demons pushing them apart. Lily will have to put aside her fears and start trusting Strangford and the other charismatics if she wants to save her friend’s life.

*The Fire in the Glass* is the first book in an ongoing series.



## Love and Omens

**Carrie Pulkinen**

If you like romance with your mysteries, check out this story about a group of psychics living in New Orleans and operating a ghost tour agency. Blake can read the history of any object he touches. After getting run out of New York City, he’s setting up a true crime museum.

Sydney resents her visions—they’ve never brought her anything except pain. Unalterable, they show her what’s to come with no hope of changing the future. Sydney has been happily guiding ghost tours for years, but now that the company’s owner, Sean, wants to take Blake on as a partner, Sydney’s life is in shambles. She dated Blake eight years ago, but left him high and dry after a distressing vision.

Blake and Sydney are forced back together to investigate a couple of ghosts in Blake’s museum who seem to have something important to say, as well as Sydney’s frightening new vision of a coffin with a mysterious body inside. Sydney dives deep into her visions to find clues, but she can’t solve the mystery alone. With some help from Sean, who can communicate with ghosts, and her coworker Eric, who feels the emotions of those around him, and a lot of help from her ex-flame Blake, can Sydney find out who is going to die and, for the first time, prevent their death?

This is the second book in the Crescent City Ghost Tours series, but works great as a standalone.



### About the author

**Elle Wren Burke** is a paranormal cozy mystery author who writes witty, fun books with strong females as protagonists. Elle has always been fascinated with psychics and their mysterious gifts, and she loves to read and write about them. Her current series, *Prickly Pear Psychic Mysteries*, features a psychic living in the Southwest. Elle lives in Arizona with her husband and fur baby. Learn more at [elleburkeauthor.com/books](http://elleburkeauthor.com/books).





**Janet Evanovich**  
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Janet Evanovich

Janet Evanovich is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Stephanie Plum series, the Lizzy and Diesel series, twelve romance novels, the Alexandra Barnaby novels and *Trouble Maker* graphic novel, and *How I Write: Secrets of a Bestselling Author*, as well as the Fox and O’Hare series with co-author Lee Goldberg.

**Q. *The Recovery Agent* is the first in a new series. Who is Gabriela Rose? How did she first come into your imagination?**

**Janet:** Gabriela Rose is a very successful recovery agent. She finds lost things. Her roots are in a small coastal town in South Carolina, but she now lives in a condo in NYC. She’s a crack shot, a gourmet cook, and a realistic fashionista. When in the jungle, dress for the jungle. In other words, she’s the opposite of Stephanie Plum. I love Stephanie, but I thought it would be fun to create a self-made heroine who was extremely successful and had worldwide adventures. She has the cool slickness of James Bond and the passion for finding lost treasures of Indiana Jones. She also has a sexy, annoying ex-husband who holds the key to her treasure chest.

**Q. The jungles of Peru make for a classic adventure setting. How important is setting to *The Recovery Agent*? What went into your exploration of this milieu?**

**Janet:** The setting is extremely important because it sets the tone for the series. It tells us that this series will be global and not necessarily urban. It also gives me a chance to vicariously explore exotic locations I’ve never had the opportunity to see in person (yet), like Peru. And in the same series I can revisit favorite locations where I’ve actually spent time, like NYC. I did a lot of Googling for this first book. And I talked to people who knew many of the locations first-hand.

**Q. Four decades into your blockbuster career, you continue to put out back-to-back bestsellers. Is this the easy part of your career? What keeps writing challenging and fun?**

**Janet:** Nothing about this is easy. It’s a demanding job that requires discipline, skill, and dedication. Also, a bag of chips and a glass of wine. The job is diabolically challenging because I’m always trying to top the last book, always worried about disappointing my readers. The fun part is the process. Every morning I get to go into a world I’ve created and move my characters through their day. This is a rush for the first three or four hours. After the first four hours, the rush requires Cheez Doodles (crunchy).

**Q. Famously, you work and write seven days a week. What drives you?**

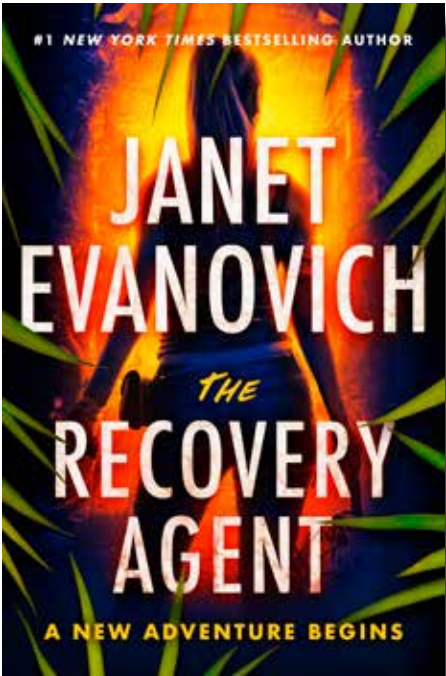
**Janet:** Turns out if you stop giving your publisher books, they stop giving you money. Also, I’m addicted to writing. It’s the world’s best job.

**Q. If you hadn’t been a writer, what would you have wanted to do for a living?**

**Janet:** Truth is, I’d have a hard time supporting myself if it wasn’t for writing. I was a total failure at many, many jobs before figuring out I was good at telling stories.

**Q. What’s next for Gabriela Rose? And when will we see Stephanie Plum again?**

**Janet:** Gabriela Rose will be doing more globe-trotting. And the sexy, annoying ex-husband will be trotting with her. Plum appears every November.



Janet Evanovich’s latest: *The Recovery Agent*

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.

Inspired by an old family legend, Gabriela sets off for the jungles of Peru in pursuit of the Ring of Solomon and the lost treasure of Cortez. But this particular job comes with a huge problem attached to it—Gabriela’s ex-husband, Rafer. It’s Rafer who has the map that possibly points the way to the treasure, and he’s not about to let Gabriela find it without him.

Rafer is as relaxed as Gabriela is driven, and he has a lifetime’s experience getting under his ex-wife’s skin. But when they aren’t bickering about old times the two make a formidable team, and it’s going to take a team to defeat the vicious drug lord who has also been searching for the fabled ring. A drug lord who doesn’t mind leaving a large body count behind him to get it.

# Unlikeable Characters

Do characters in thrillers really have to be likeable?

BY CARA REINARD

**M**uch like the elementary school where my children attend, there seems to be an odd onus for authors to spread kindness into the world—even where kindness is not warranted.

Like in thrillers. Where people are being hunted. And murdered. By individuals who couldn't possibly commit these crimes if they weren't ... you guessed it: unlikeable.

I'm currently enrolled in an MFA program where I was assigned to read the short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor, in which a villain, The Misfit, murders an entire family after they make a wrong turn down a country road. Although O'Connor hopscotches point of views with the fluidity of an expert origamist, the story likely wouldn't be published today because it breaks a major rule in modern publishing. It has absolutely no likable characters.

I can't say that I enjoyed the chilling piece, but everything we read that impacts us isn't for our pleasure. I kept waiting for the moment when someone would save this family.

Surely, there would be a passerby who would take notice of the distressed vehicle and step into action. At the worst, perhaps a few adults would go down at the hands of The Misfit, but they couldn't possibly kill the children, too. Even though they were painted as awful brats, it was unconscionable to believe they wouldn't be spared. They'd slip away somehow, right?

Wrong. Because sometimes there are truly terrible people who do heinous things, and in 1953, they weren't afraid to depict them in literature. Do I want to read a full-length novel with the same feel as "A Good Man is Hard to Find"?

No, absolutely not. However, it makes me wonder if we've lost the art of placing a truly fleshed-out villain on the page for fear of offending the reader. I'm guilty of padding my antagonists with save-the-cat attributes. Nowadays it seems as though publishers require that your baddy have at least one redeemable quality. But as I studied O'Connor's work, it made me wonder if we're watering down our antagonists too much, and if it's hurting the credibility of our writing in the process.

While I almost always have one protagonist to root for in my novels, I do think it's going a bit far to require our villains be likable as well. We've already given these complex characters a vulnerability to please the reader. We've already given you the cat! It needs to be enough.

Well, what about the other characters in the story, not just the antagonist? Surely, they must be likable.

Let's talk about this point logically.

What is the definition of *likable* per Oxford Languages?

*Likable: pleasant, friendly, and easy to like.* Sometimes I wonder if "unlikeable" is a new word for the catch phrase—I just didn't connect with the protagonist. Surely, it can't be expected for these characters to maintain a pleasant disposition with the world crashing down all around them.

Awful events often occur to nice individuals in thrillers who make poor decisions. The protagonists in thrillers are flawed, just like real people. And these imperfect characters should have the freedom to live on the page—fully. Without them, it'd likely be a very dull story, or no story at all.

Let's put this into perspective using a different medium where characters are forced into difficult situations. When viewing an R-rated movie, would it be understandable to walk out of the theater due to unlikeable actors firing off guns along with expletive language? Likely not, right? Reading an adult thriller should be regarded the same way. The category for

these novels is adult; the genre is suspense/thriller (assume there may be adult conduct, such as nudity, violence, or swearing).

Often, the blurbs on the book jackets allude to the fact that unpleasant circumstances are likely to occur in the novel, including life-altering secrets, missing person narratives, and murder. My thoughts: what are your presumptions going into that sort of novel after reading the description? If it's that you're going to be surrounded by likable characters, perhaps it's time to reevaluate your expectations.

Yes, it's understandable to be able to relate to at least one of the characters in the novel. There must be a suspension of belief where the reader is able to adequately place themselves in their shoes and live there for an indeterminable amount of hours. But under no circumstances are you supposed to want to invite them over for dinner. It's not our responsibility as the author to make you like the character.

This isn't romance. You are not to fall in love.

It is our responsibility to make you interested enough

about the character's story to keep reading. And sometimes that intrigue comes from exploring the point of view of some villainous folk. One of my favorite characters of all time is Caroline Kepnes' Joe Goldberg from *You*. He's a stalker and a serial killer, and yet those of us who have devoured-loved-worshipped the ridiculously successful novel series-turned-Netflix show appreciate Joe and all his bizarre quirks. He's deeply disturbed, yet keeps us flipping the page.

My second thriller, *Into the Sound*, has a strong female protagonist on the hunt to find her sister, who's vanished during a Long Island superstorm. But there are also two male characters in the book who are extremely unlikeable.

There's plenty of real-world villains, and in order to adequately tell these twisted tales, sometimes these naughty characters need a little airtime. Let them have it, I say!

Can we kill the expectation of likable characters in thrillers, pretty please? I'm asking from the bottom of my deep, dark heart.



## About the author

**Cara Reinard is the Amazon bestselling author of *Sweet Water*. Her second domestic thriller, *Into the Sound*, was released in December 2021. Cara currently resides north of Pittsburgh with her husband, two children, and Bernese Mountain dog. Visit [carareinard.com](http://carareinard.com).**







**Greer Hendricks & Sarah Pekkanen**  
#1 *New York Times* bestselling co-authors  
sarahpekkannen.com  
greerhendricks.com

Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen

Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen are the #1 *New York Times* bestselling co-authors of *The Wife Between Us*, *An Anonymous Girl*, and *You Are Not Alone*, as well as the forthcoming *The Golden Couple*. *An Anonymous Girl* and *You Are Not Alone* have been optioned for television with Greer and Sarah executive producing. *The Wife Between Us* has been optioned for film by Amblin Entertainment, with Greer and Sarah screenwriting the adaptation.

**Q. Your latest, *The Golden Couple*, is a twisty thriller about a couple on the rocks and the secrets that come crashing in when they sit down with a rogue marriage counselor. Without giving anything away, how are secrets and betrayal at the heart of this story?**

**Sarah:** There’s a deliciously voyeuristic element to *The Golden Couple*. In peeling back the facade of an enviable marriage, it’s like we’re getting the chance to snoop through the diaries and nightstands of that couple—the seemingly perfect pair who never argue and who never have dog hair on their coats or mud on their designer boots. Avery, the maverick counselor at the heart of our story, knows nearly every married couple keeps secrets from the outside world as well as from one another. One of the great things about Avery is that she won’t tolerate being lied to—and her unorthodox method of treatment is often most successful when she helps a client understand that the most important person they’ve been lying to is herself.

**Q. Why do readers love secrets, especially in other peoples’ marriages?**

**Greer:** There’s a reason why the adage *you never know what goes on behind closed doors* rings true for many of us. Today, more than ever, we scroll through social media and see a glamorous couple at a fancy restaurant or a smiling family beach photo, but these images might not reveal the truth. In my experience, most people are dealing with something beneath the surface (an unhappy marriage, a troubled child, an ailing parent) and it makes us feel less alone to know that others might also be struggling.

**Q. Greer, you were Sarah’s editor before you joined forces to begin a writing partnership. How did this winning duo form?**

**Greer:** Sarah and I worked on seven books together as an author/editor team. When I left corporate publishing, I knew I wanted to try and write a novel, but I wasn’t telling many people because I was terrified I would fail. However, I did confess this secret to Sarah and she suggested we write together. Sarah is instinctual and her gut told her that as a team we could create something magical. We came up with the synopsis for *The Wife Between Us* and hit the ground running.

**Sarah:** At the time, Greer was editing a couple of different writer duos that I also knew pretty well, and I think that’s what initially gave me the idea. As a former newspaper journalist

and magazine writer, I’d collaborated with lots of writers on smaller projects, and I’d always enjoyed the process. I trust my instincts because they usually guide me well—and I’m very grateful that in this case, they nudged me toward a writing partnership with Greer!

**Q. What’s it like to write novels with another person?**

**Sarah:** COVID changed up our work routine, like it did for just about everyone else in the world. Greer and I still talked about every scene, but there was more individual writing in this book because our houses were too noisy and chaotic to allow for productive Google calls. (It tends to put a damper on the creative process when one hears shouts of, “Mooooooooommmmm, can you make me something to eat?”)

We always say one of the best parts of working together is when we tour—after spending so much time on the phone, we love getting together in person, having a glass of wine, and talking for hours. We can’t wait to do that again.

**Greer:** Having never written a book alone, I can only say writing with Sarah has been a magical experience. For our first three books we wrote every line together using Google docs and Google hangouts (without the camera!). We got on the phone at 9 a.m., caught up on our personal lives and then hunkered down to work.

For *The Golden Couple*, our process was a little different because we both had houses filled with children and partners, but the result still worked. I would say, there is very little dividing and conquering because we both enjoy all aspects of the process from research, writing, revising, and even the promotion/marketing side.

**Q. Your hits just keep coming with successes like *The Wife Between Us* (2018), *An Anonymous Girl* (2019), and *You Are Not Alone* (2020). Was there a moment when you realized you’d hit it big?**

**Greer:** I think the moment I felt like we were really succeeding was when we learned that *The Wife Between Us* had landed at #2 on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Our pub-

lishing team called Sarah and I to tell us the incredible news and I still have the folder where I wrote down the number. As if I was going to forget it!

**Sarah:** For me, it was the moment we learned Jen Enderlin, the editor atop our dream list, wanted to publish our book. Things happened so quickly after that—within a day, a Hollywood scout had gotten her hands on the first third of our manuscript and our outline for the final two acts, and suddenly we were on the phone with producers and film agents who envisioned our story for the screen. Amblin bought the rights to *The Wife Between Us*, and subsequently hired us to write the script. I’m a writer, yet I have no words to convey how thrilling this felt. It still seems surreal.

**Q. Who are some of your favorite authors?**

**Sarah:** Far too many to list here! Some of my favorites are Taylor Jenkins Reid, Sally Hepworth, Laura Dave, Colleen Hoover, and I adore everything Michael Connelly and Harlan Coben write. I recently devoured *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah, and I love dipping into YA—a favorite in that genre is Nicola Yoon’s *Everything, Everything*. Lisa Scottoline is one of the nicest authors I’ve personally met, and I’m a big fan of her work. And my high school classmate, Laura Hillenbrand, is perhaps the finest writer I know (as well as a hilariously funny person).

**Greer:** I can’t even begin to list all of my favorite authors, but here are a few of my favorite books of the past year. First up, two books about publishing: *The Plot* by Jean Hanff Korelitz (about a once-promising author, who now teaches MFA seminars at an obscure university and steals an irresistible storyline from one of his students to write his own come-back) and *Who is Maud Dixon?* by Alexandra Andrews (a low-level editorial assistant who yearns to be a famous author stumbles into a position working for a mysterious bestselling author, Maud Dixon). Also, like a million other readers, I loved *Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell and *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett. In the memoir category I devoured Katie Couric’s *Going There* and Andre Agassi’s *Open*.



Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen’s latest: *The Golden Couple*

If Avery Chambers can’t fix you in ten sessions, she won’t take you on as a client. Her successes are phenomenal—she helps people overcome everything from domineering parents to assault—and almost absorb the emptiness she sometimes feels since her husband’s death.

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. Because the biggest secrets in the room are still hidden, and it’s no longer simply a marriage that’s in danger.



# The Women of Contemporary Femme Noir

BY VALERIE J. BROOKS

“Femme noir” tells stories of power struggles in the boardroom, in law enforcement, and in the industries of capitalism. The female femme noir characters don’t need to be crazy, manipulative, or psychopaths. Here are 11 authors who do it right.

In contrast to domestic noir, femme noir takes place primarily outside homes where external forces dangerously compromise the female experience. Stolen livelihoods, the hammer of power or privilege, outmoded societal ideas of femininity, patriarchal systems of suppression, and dark forces cause the femme noir character to make desperate or bad choices. At its base, femme noir takes a broadly feminist view that external forces push female characters into ever more dangerous territory.

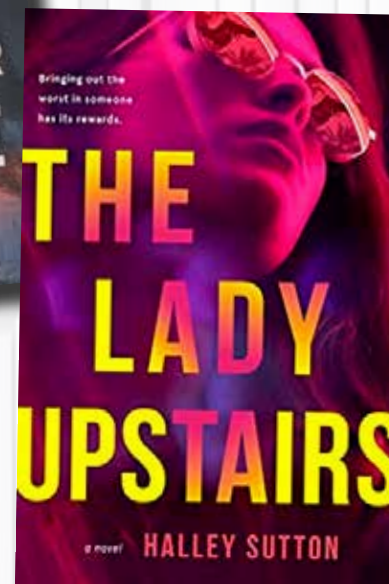
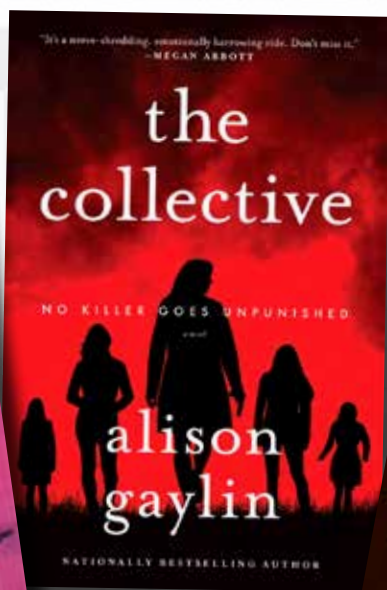
My assignment was to offer book recommendations of contemporary femme noir authors. Where to start? I dug into my noir library and piled every contemporary femme noir novel I owned onto my desk. After that, I leaned copies of Dorothy B. Hughes and Patricia Highsmith’s books against my mug of writing pens and pencils and said, “Lead the

way, Grand Dames.” I’m a visual person and decided they deserved a shrine as I wrote about their modern counterparts. I didn’t have a gun, rope, or cigarette to lay at their spines, but I did have a bottle of Irish whiskey (aptly named “Writers’ Tears”), and I had a knife, a wicked knife. Now I was ready to make my way through the books.

But how to whittle down such a pile? So many. Such delicious variety. And I haven’t even included the Asian or South African femme noir authors I have on my e-reader.

So, I decided to highlight the authors I’ve read, the ones who have tingled my spine, kept me up all hours, and mesmerized me with wild or unique voices and jaw-dropping twists. Some even made me laugh. But all of them captured the difficult-to-define quality of noir and represented the best, in my experience, of what is now the femme noir genre.





**Laura Lippman** rose to the top of my favorite authors' list more than ten novels ago. Tess Gerritsen called her "one of the best crime novelists writing today." I call her one of the best novelists working today, period. Packed with keen observation, vivid characters, and brilliantly dark settings around Baltimore, Lippman modernizes the classic noir tropes in her page-turning novels. *Library Journal* calls my recommended read, *Sunburn*, "Modern noir at its best."

**Megan Abbott** has been called the Queen of Noir. Seductive, hard-boiled characters combined with modern back alleys, casinos, racetracks, and money heists. All the classic noir tropes. Abbott finds a voice for female characters who usurp the male-dominated underworld. Abbott also gave us one of the better definitions of noir: "A world where everyone is fallen [and] right and wrong are not clearly defined, [perhaps] not even attainable." Check out Edgar winner *Queenpin*.

Although branded as psychological thrillers, **Alison Gaylin's** novels often fall hard into the femme noir category. Dark, propulsive, and even diabolical, her novels have kicked me in the gut. As Megan Abbott says about my recommended read, *The Collective*, "It's a nerve-shredding, emotionally harrowing ride." I never miss her novels because she performs more twists and turns than an Olympic gymnast.

**Oyinkan Braithwaite** does the almost impossible—fusing deadpan wit with noir. A fearless author, she writes of Nigerian women caught in a culture that demands inventive ways to stay on top. Hilarious and creepy, her debut novel, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, promises a future of femme noir gems.

This successful Canadian author was advised to write darker. **Hannah Mary McKinnon** blew past that advice with her fifth novel and landed in femme noir territory. Although the resulting story uses the classic noir trope of a relationship triangle, the overall femme noir tropes include sexual power and the consequences of bad choices. With its jaw-dropping, shocking ending, my recommended read, *You Will Remember Me*, epitomizes noir. Hank Phillippi Ryan called it "...diabolical, mesmerizing, riveting, and irresistible." I wholeheartedly agree.

I can't wait to read **Halley Sutton's** next novel. After her debut showing, *The Lady Upstairs*, she's proved herself to be a femme noir writer to watch. Seductive prose, twisted motives, piercing insight into a woman's need for revenge, and an LA as dark as any male writer's, her novel was one of my favorites of 2020. As award-winning author Lori Rader-Day wrote, "Feminist noir that should scare a few awful men into better behavior."

I cannot tell you how **Ottessa Moshfegh's** mind works. At times humorous, other times morbid, her writing drips with Hitchcockian complexity while her characters do the unimaginable. Yet, like reading a Shirley Jackson story, her writing style and imagery mesmerizes. NPR called her novel *Eileen* "Charmingly disturbing. Delightfully dour. Pleasingly perverse." A femme noir writer of chilling originality.

Down-on-your luck characters fill **Vicki Hendricks's** noir novels, but they are far from boring. Hendricks writes Florida like Carl Hiaasen after a sex change. Her characters are sexy, raw, and strange, and so is her setting. Florida's muggy underbelly overshadows its sunshine. Hendricks knows the twisted logic of her characters. As James Ellroy so perfectly states: "It's 'Hard Copy' meets James M. Cain meets white trash with a vengeance." Try her debut, *Miami Purity*.



**Silvia Moreno-Garcia's** latest, *Velvet Was the Night*, is called "A noir masterpiece" by Kirkus Reviews. This versatile author had me with her heart-pounding *Mexican Gothic*, a true gothic novel that some consider horror, then turned her talents to one of the best femme noirs I've ever read. She blends political intrigue, student protests, art, Mexican culture, and even a protagonist who is a secretary and loves romance comics. Atmospheric, with memorable characters thrown into the chaos of a violent world, this gets my highest recommendation.

With a string of successful, dark, twisty novels, **Samantha Downing** ratchets up her writing to deliver a femme noir that's original and gut-punching. With *For Your Own Good*, she uses her spare prose to its maximum effect in creating a main character who is diabolical and sinister, yet engaging. So many twists and layers of revenge that even the most jaded will love her noir. As best-selling author Hannah Mary McKinnon says, "So dark and twisted, so deliciously evil, it'll not only make you frantically turn those pages to find out who's targeting whom, but the wry sense of humor will have you laughing out loud, too." The halls of academia will never be the same.

I'll never see Italy the same way again. **Liska Jacobs** takes on a tough subject in her femme noir *The Worst Kind of Want*—a woman's unruly sexual desire at middle age. With sharp insight into the struggles of aging, Jacobs gives us a feminist thrill ride with a complicated woman in search of lost youth who keeps making one bad move after another. As author Janet Fitch wrote, "The perfect vacation read, like *Under the Tuscan Sun* gone darkly, desperately wrong." Like an accident where I couldn't look away, I furiously turned pages as the main character's choices pushed her ever faster toward the brink of disaster.



**About the author**

Multi-award-winning author **Valerie J. Brooks** writes femme noir fiction where the women are badass and take center stage. The first in the Angeline Porter Trilogy, *Revenge in 3 Parts* was a finalist for the Nancy Pearl Book Award.

Brooks is a member of Sisters in Crime. Her awards include an Elizabeth George Foundation grant and five writing residencies. She teaches workshops and classes on writing noir and creating plot twists. She lives in Oregon with her husband, Dan Connors. See more at [valeriejbrooks.com](http://valeriejbrooks.com).

*She was searching for a mystery.  
What she found was so much more...*

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# THE FANTASY THRILLER

How *A Game of Thrones* and the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series shaped the genre

BY BRADY CALEB WILKINSON

It's only natural for storytellers to imitate the most successful titles, but this inevitably leads to homogeneity and over-saturation. It is at such times that innovators arise to differentiate themselves from the pack and carve out an entirely new niche for the cycle to repeat. In evolutionary biology, it's called "key innovation," while in market dynamics we call it "chasing the trends."

More specific to the realm of fiction writing, we see this manifest in the development of genre. The fantasy genre is genus that often finds itself over-stuffed, which in turn makes it a fertile ground for key innovation. Science fiction as a genre exists primarily as a response to the influx of scientific knowledge that radically altered peoples' understanding of the world. We've seen the cross-pollination of fantasy romance from two colliding over-populated niches. Now, in recent years, we have seen the rise of a new sub-species: the fantasy thriller.

It is near impossible to assign a single work as the sole moment of advent. Our differing and various definitions as such may put our assessments at odds. Do we count the works of Steven King as fantasy thrillers? They're often called thrillers and have fantastical elements, but more often than not he is described as a "horror writer." What about Harry Potter? The books are practically textbook examples of "boarding school thrillers" within a fantasy setting ... but many fans of the genre would hesitate to grant those works the title due to their association with young readers.

It is for this reason that a true key innovator must be unquestionably of the genre; so much so that the genre is defined by its association with the work and prior works are grandfathered in with the blessing of hindsight. This why the key innovator of the fantasy thriller is unquestionably George R.R. Martin's masterpiece series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

The low-fantasy nature of the setting allows what was previously perceived to be the mundane functions of the world (court intrigue and political machinations) from being drowned out by the extravagances of world-building. Magic, dragons, and ice zombies all exist, but they do not dominate the world and thus don't dominate the story. (The last couple

of seasons of the TV series is precisely why GRRM was wise to avoid this.) This allows the intrigue, the beating heart of any good thriller, to rise to prominence.

Yes, Jon Snow is staring down an army of black magic ice zombies, but the real tension lies in whether or not he'll be able to unite bickering people against a greater threat. Yes, Daenerys has a trio of dragons, but the tension in her story revolves around whether or not she'll become a good ruler. Yes, Arya is training to be a magical assassin, but the peril of her plot is whether or not she'll lose herself in a quest for vengeance. Then we have Tyrion, through whom Martin summons the full measure of his considerable might to indel the concept on popular culture for all time.

The tension lies in a burning question, not the power level of a chosen one in an arbitrarily ordained moment of destiny. Characters' agency actively aids the tension by virtue of their logical actions being what imperils them most. It's an unfolding mystery that captivates the audience and dominated popular culture for many years. Rightly or wrongly, the fantasy thriller is defined by *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

Though I firmly stand by the assertion that Harry Potter is a fantasy thriller, I recognize I do so in hindsight after reading Martin's work. While it may match the criteria, I wasn't even cognizant of what the criteria was. Series such as Charlene Harris' *Dead Until Dark* meet the mark as well. Then we have those works following in the footsteps of George R.R. Martin.

Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen*, Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows*, Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, and hundreds of others would not exist without the evolutionary breakthrough of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Much the same that there would be no eagles without the dromaeosaur (raptors). You can even see it in the naming convention, "the [noun] of/or [elemental noun] and [opposite elemental noun]." (Hell, I'm guilty of this ... *The Dance of Dawn and Dusk*.)

Yet we now approach the moment of oversaturation of the new niche. My suspicion is that another innovation is coming due. I wonder what feathers this new beast will have.



## About the author

Brady Wilkinson hates talking in the third person about himself. I'm an animal, human, and author. Visit [bradycalebwilkinson.com](http://bradycalebwilkinson.com).





**Stephen Hunter**  
Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic and novelist  
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Stephen Hunter

Stephen Hunter has written more than twenty novels. The retired chief film critic for *The Washington Post*, where he won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism, he has also published two collections of film criticism and a nonfiction work, *American Gunfight*. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Q. Bob Lee Swagger is back in *Targeted*. How has your iconic character changed over twelve books? How have geopolitical events of the last almost thirty years affected Bob Lee?**

**Stephen:** I’ve indexed Swagger’s age to my own so that I can always be clear on the physical limitations of the body. It’s been suggested that I keep Bob a perpetual thirty-five, but my own thirties are pretty much a haze, so I don’t think I could bring that off! As for geopolitics, Bob is and has been a sergeant and has a sergeant’s view of all things—practical, trees not forest, distrusting of “suits” and disdainful of HQ politics. Those attributes have remained steady no matter where he is or who’s up or down.

**Q. *Point of Impact* provided the story for both the 2007 film (starring Mark Wahlberg) and the 2016 TV series (starring Ryan Phillippe) *Shooter*. What was the journey like for you, from your 1993 hit book to these screen successes?**

**Stephen:** I was treated well by all concerned so I have no complaints. I was also old enough to know there’d come a day when they stopped returning my phone calls, so when that happened I wasn’t devastated, embittered, turned sour. That’s the business we’re in. As for seeing the dramatizations of my own work, it was dislocating. It was like seeing your dreams in someone else’s head.

**Q. Besides fiction, you’re well known for your editorial and critical roles at *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Washington Post*, where you worked from 1971 to 2008. Do you consider yourself first a journalist or novelist?**

**Stephen:** Consider myself now a novelist and see no gain in looking back. I try not to be terribly self-conscious of my work. I just do it. It does seem that the voice of my fiction is veering more toward the voice of the critic, meaning it’s more sardonic, ironic, satirical, comical. No jokes in *Dirty White Boys*, plenty in *Targeted*.

**Q. You’re an involved member of International Thriller Writers (ITW) and other writing organizations. What’s your philosophy on involvement within the greater community of writers?**

**Stephen:** Happy to help generally, but not interested in helping specifically. That means I’ll give speeches and write advice, but I will never have a mentee, I will never try and help somebody get published, I will never make phone calls on anyone’s behalf. In fact, at seventy-five, I’m still looking for my first mentor! Any suggestions?

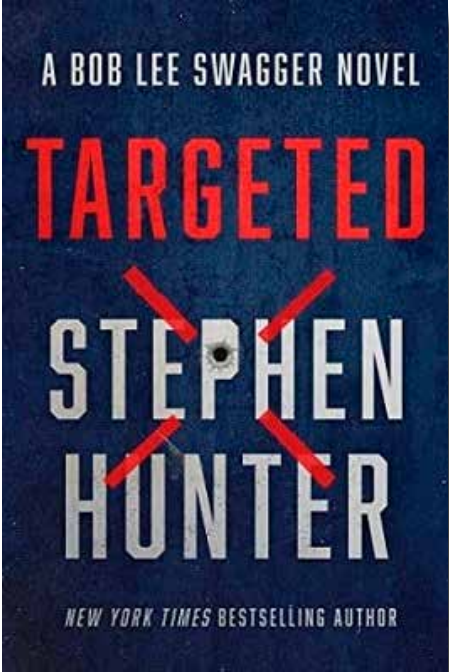
**Q. What have you read lately that you enjoyed?**

**Stephen:** Not a big reader of books, including the ones I’ve written. I have the internet-degraded attention span of

a gnat with continence issues. Read blogs, mags, opinion pieces and so forth, hardly ever actual books. Fill my need with Brit TV; big fan of Suchet’s *Poirot*, Cumberbatch’s *Sherlock*, as well as others. My big ambition used to be to get an ITW life award; now it’s to live long enough to see the final season of *Peaky Blinders*!

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

**Stephen:** Big WWII novel called *The Bullet Garden* and loving every second of it. No emails, lots of tommy guns!



Stephen Hunter’s latest: *Targeted*

After his takedown of a dangerous terrorist, Bob Lee Swagger learns that no good deed goes unpunished. Despite the fact that his actions nearly killed him—and did kill the would-be assassin—the U.S. Congress has summoned him to court. A hardheaded anti-gun senator has accused Swagger of reckless endangerment, determined to make an example of him. He must go before the House Judiciary Committee in Boise, Idaho. But what begins as political posturing soon turns deadly when the auditorium where the committee is being held is attacked.

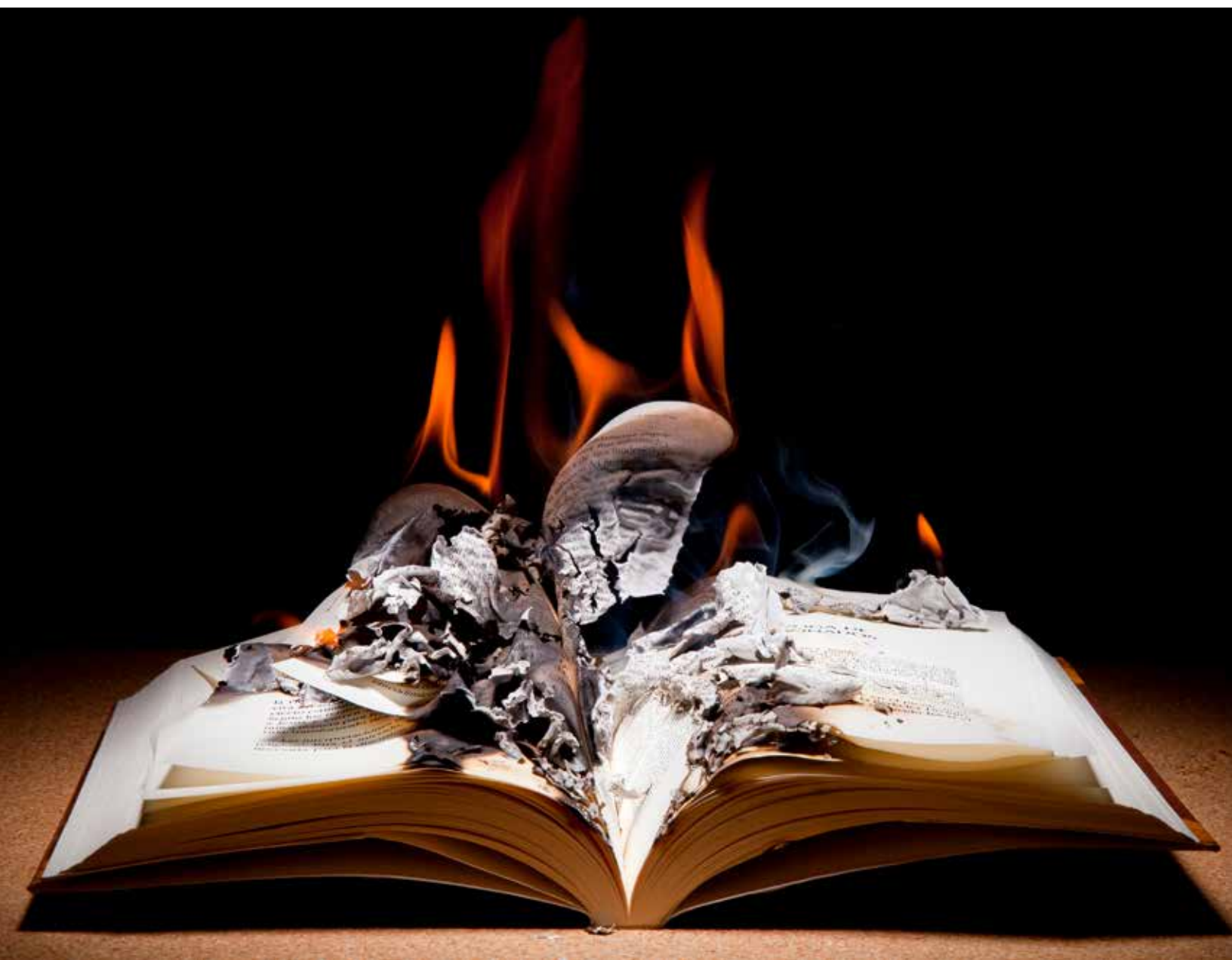
Swagger, the senator, and numerous bystanders and reporters are taken hostage by a group of violent operatives. Soon, the very people who had accused him are depending on him to save their lives. Trapped in the auditorium and still struggling with his injuries, Swagger must rely on his instincts, his shooting skills, and the help of a mysterious rogue sniper on the outside in order to ensure that everyone makes it out alive.



# Bad Endings

The bane of every enthusiastic reader ... and restaurant diner

BY TIMOTHY GENE SOJKA



**I**magine sitting at a table in the dining establishment of your dreams. Smells of decadence waft through the air; the waiter's attire suggests an evening of elegance. The appetizer amuses your palate just before your salad arrives, highlighted by innovative presentation and bold new flavors.

The entrée, cooked to perfection, fills your tummy ... and your soul. The dessert takes you back to your grandmother's kitchen and your favorite indulgence.

How could the evening be more perfect?

Then you ask for the check.

Your waiter takes your AMEX, but does not return with your card or bill promptly.

Your concert tickets announce the show starts in forty-five minutes. Your previously adored server delivers drinks to the neighboring tables, collects dishes from the table of eight, then heads toward the back. Moments later you see him tip-flirting the grand marmes in the corner, chatting up the assistant manager, and *for gosh sake* why is the hostess giving him a new table, when he can't even bring your bill?

You finally get the bill, pay in a huff and leave the restaurant. The amusing appetizer and culinary induced memories of your grandmother's kitchen are long forgotten. You remember the ending, the delay in getting the check.

Restaurants and movies are exactly the same. Everyone remembers how it ends.

When a reader selects a novel, they agree to give the writer hours of their time. The reader assumes a contract has been drawn with the writer, a promise that the author will not let them down in the end. The greater the promise

of a novel or show, the angrier the reader or viewer becomes with flaccid endings.

Think for a moment: a novel starts great, the second act proves enchanting and enlightening, then the ending sucks. A bad ending sticks to a reader like the smell of dog crap hangs onto your favorite shoes, no matter how many times you wash them, *why* don't people pick up after their dog ... sorry, tangent.

*Game of Thrones* developed into one of the greatest cable series of our time; show-stopping effects, beautiful people, well written, innovative. The Hodor plot twist remains a jaw dropper. Still, when fellow viewers, people who invested years in the HBO show, discuss the ending, one word rises. Vitriol.

Bad endings fail to deliver on their promise (Bran, seriously) or outright lie at the worst (the show's creators spent eight seasons telling me Daenerys would never do that).

To avoid disappointment, writers must start knowing the ending. The final scenes must deliver unpredictability and inevitability. When the ending arrives, readers must be unprepared but understand ... of course ... how could the movie end any other way?

As a slow-arriving check can destroy a great dining experience. A prompt bill may leave a diner with a warm last memory; at least I'll make my meeting.

A fantastic ending offers so much more, a chance for readers to promote an average book to good, a good book to great, and a great book into a classic.

May all your checks arrive promptly and all your books end well.



## About the author

**Timothy Gene Sojka** writes for enjoyment, paddle-boards for stress relief, and runs so he can eat Tex-Mex. He has a passion for plot twists and pushing the "philosophically pure" to the point of hypocrisy. Tim enjoys time with his wife, Lori, hanging out with his daughter, Abigail, and playing 42 Dominoes with his mother and grandmother. Sojka's debut novel, *Payback Jack*, became a #1 Amazon Thriller and received 5-star reviews from around the globe.





# The Four-Hundred-Yard Cage

BY WILLIAM BURTON MCCORMICK

1992

“Swimmers take the blocks,” proclaims the race official and we step up onto the starting blocks, eight young men above eight shimmering pool lanes. Shouts of encouragement echo down from the crowd in the stands. A few calls for the other swimmers, most reserved for my collegiate teammate, Richard Garson. None for me.

“Swimmers take your marks.”

We crouch in our starting positions, muscles tense, minds attuned to the competition ahead. The Stenner Swim Center turns quiet, then the stillness is broken by the electronic starting beep from speakers at the blocks’ bases. The muscles release. Motion. Animation. A moment gliding through dry air, a pirouette downward, and then the sensation of aquatic coolness.

I arch my back as I enter the waters, my dive’s momentum propelling me forward just under the surface. The start is my race’s strength, and I surface ahead of the other swimmers. Most meets my early lead falters quickly, but today? Who knows? Today, adrenaline and nervous energy run high, for this is my only race, the four-hundred-yard individual medley. Sixteen lengths of the pool in four different swimming strokes—butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke, and lastly, freestyle.

I churn through the waters in the butterfly, thrusting my hips and rolling my arms over my shoulders, the motion naturally elevating my head at every stroke. I risk a glance at the competition. My lead has vanished before the first turn, all bodies aligned, a whitewater of eight undulating butterfly swimmers. Garson over in lane

four is still solidly among the herd. Usually, he’s pulling away by now, even at this early moment in the race.

Is he less than elite today?

I take the first turn into the race’s second length, swimming through the third and then the fourth lengths, the final stretch of the butterfly portion. Garson is still with us, even with the field, holding strong if not excelling.

Doubts arise. Perhaps it won’t work. Perhaps I extracted the wrong chemicals from the paint ingredients. Perhaps he’ll beat me again.

The words “Swim your own race” come to me. It is the oldest maxim in the sport. Don’t watch the competition, stay focused on your performance, technique, and body...

But as we reach the next turn, and I shift my position to the backstroke, my mind can’t help but stray as I stare at the ceiling rafters so high above, doubts and memories coursing into my mind even as the waters flow around my body.

I endured Richard Garson’s insults for our first three years without complaint, even when Garson redshirted our sophomore year and did nothing but sit on the pool deck and lob verbal grenades toward me, laughed and convinced others to laugh at my performances. I don’t know the source of his hate. I think he did it because he could, but it birthed an equally retaliatory anger in me. Everyone on the team has ridiculous nicknames—Exile, Trouper, Juice, Whopper—everyone except Garson, who was above it all, and no one dared call the star swimmer



anything he didn't like. Yet, Garson gave me the most wretched nickname of all, one so embarrassing, so crass, it was banned by the college from chanting during competition, though he used it everywhere else: dorm, cafeteria, in front of girlfriends and family. When Garson was made captain, he went further. Used the position as a platform to isolate me, to humiliate and make me the butt of jokes and object of disrespect even from incoming freshmen swimmers who had proven nothing. Friends abandoned my company out of fear they too would be targeted and isolated, and on road trips I lodged alone unless Garson led my sheeplike teammates inside to partake in a mocking scheme.

Then I conspired revenge.

I gave no hint of my plans, indeed thanks to Garson's slander, very few paid attention to my actions. So, I played the congenial lackey, the team fool, laughing off the insults with self-deprecating humor. When Garson convinced the coach to cut my events from two to one, I asked him why.

"I mean to make you quit the team," Garson told me bluntly in the locker room alone. "I have a bet with Trouper. And 'til you're as good as I, everyone will always side with the winner."

What could I do? The clueless coach left policing to his captain. The sheriff himself the criminal.

Our school colors are white and Prussian blue. The dye for the latter includes cyanide in a harmless form. But as a chemistry major, I knew the right precursor to use, how to activate the poison, turn it lethal. I gained access to the ingredients, volunteering to make Prussian blue bunting, banners, and flags for the spring dance and parade. Even missed swim practice to do it. Garson derided me for the absence, said I wasn't committed enough and should quit.

I was committed and I mostly certainly did not quit.

My mind returns to the race. I spy the line of triangular flags above, indicating five yards to the wall. Four strokes and I lower my shoulder, flip. My feet find the wall and I push off for the sixth length, backstroking in my lane, through this lap and the seventh and eighth. I am tossed about in the wake of others. I tarry behind. My concentration off, tension keeping my muscles tight and performing poorly. It doesn't bother me much. This isn't about my winning. It's about *his* losing. Losing today and all his tomorrows.

Only twenty minutes before the meet began, all swimmers were finishing their shaving down, using razors to eliminate any hairs not covered by swimsuit or cap, to

expose the nerve endings for a better feel for the water. It made us all faster. For me, it was about 0.7 seconds per fifty yards, a total approaching six seconds in the four-hundred I.M.

For Garson, it was even greater. And he was meticulous.

"Hurry up," he said to me in his usual mocking tone, as we stood in our swimsuits under the showers. I was shaving Garson's back for him, the one place a swimmer can't reach on his own. Under other showerheads several other teammates did the same, a ritual before the big meet. A last preparation that must seem bizarre to non-swimmers, but necessary in the highest Division I competition.

I scraped over his shoulder blade, then dug the razor into the flesh at the small of his back, right above the suit. A cut. Blood ran out under the shower downpour.

He winced, tried to reach around to touch the wound.

"Damn, are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry," I said, playing the usual disposable fool and dropping the equally disposable razor to the floor, then reaching for a canister propped on the soap wrack. "I thought the razor blade had dulled and I pressed too hard. I'll put some ointment on it, Cap."

I poured some of the ointment onto my latex-gloved fingertips. We all wore gloves when shaving our fellows now. Magic Johnson just told the world heterosexuals can get HIV last November. Elite athletes are not immune, and no one takes risks with blood and blades.

But I took a different sort of risk and rubbed the ointment deep into Garson's cut. The gloves protected my skin from *other* dangers.

"It stings."

"Give it time. You won't feel a thing."

"Hey," said Whopper, a muscular sprinter on the floor of the shower, shaving his ankles. They look like a bloody pounded meat, razor burns and worse at every angle. "Can I have some of that ointment? Got a few cuts of my own."

"You always lacerate yourself, Whopper," said Garson indifferently. "Amazing you don't bleed to death."

"Sorry, Whopper," I said with a shrug. "All out."

"There's always more in the can you can shake out."

"No, Whopper. Exile and Trouper used most of it." A lie. But who will check? "Okay, Captain." I pulled off my gloves and threw them and the canister into the big wastebin off the locker room showers, one filled with countless razors and empty shaving cream canisters. "You're all set. Have the swim of your life, Garson."

"Won't need it to beat you, chump."

But he didn't say "chump." He said a word far worse...





We enter the breaststroke on the ninth length. The slowest, calmest stroke of the I.M., the din of splashing recedes, the cheers of the crowd now clearly heard. There are shouts of support for Garson, whom the fans expect—even demand!—to be clearly in the lead by now.

I risk a glance. Garson is not there. His slot is empty, the fourth lane’s waters comparatively calm. My pulse already drumming, a coldness washes over me, far icier than any pool waters.

It is only after the turn I spy Garson, struggling along a half pool length behind the field, trailing even my own distracted pace. His stroke is clumsy, without the long, effortless glides that make his breaststroke so formidable. His face is contorted in effort. Or agony.

I wish I could see his eyes. And the horror in them. But he wears shaded goggles. Do those eyes roll up in their sockets? Or stare into the void lifeless as dolls’ eyes?

By the next length, Garson is gripping his lane line, trying to keep himself afloat. Murmurs arise from the crowd. They know something is wrong with their champion. But they are not quite alarmed. Not yet. Cramps happen even to the best swimmers. Most competitors kick through them, not cling pathetically to the floats dividing the lanes. How humiliating for poor Garson. Do they think their hero can’t weather a few leg spasms?

*Maybe he’s not the man you thought he was. Maybe there was no reason to cheer...*

By the twelfth length, when all our lungs are burning, a surprise awaits me. Garson has released the lane line and is drifting toward the pool bottom, air bubbles erupting from his lungs as he sinks. A beautiful sight. He doesn’t flail or fight the sinking. So serene. A pale, still form untouched by the waves of other swimmers above.

Even now, help for Garson is slow in coming. If a coach, official, or noncompeting swimmer dives in for his rescue, it creates waves in the pool, voids the race, cancels performances for which each competitor has trained the whole year.

It is only a matter of seconds they hesitate, waiting for Garson to rally, but it seems forever. And I savor it.

I am in the middle of the pool when our coach sends Exile and Trouper to rescue Garson. Their entry causes the other swimmers to slow or stop their races, some diving to assist in dragging the corpse-like Garson from the bottom. The official sounds the electronic beeper again and again, terminating the event. Moans of dissatisfaction and growing distress reverberate from the stands.

But I keep swimming, my strokes as smooth as the waters allow, head high in an easy breaststroke motion. From this elevated position, I see a disturbing sight. Out

of the locker room emerges Whopper, my foam canister in his hand. He staggers along the pool deck, clumsier than usual, something clearly wrong with him, shouting toward our assistant coach. No one is watching Whopper’s approach. All eyes are on motionless Garson being pulled from the pool. By Whopper’s wobbly gait, I know what has transpired. He fished out the canister from the trash, applied the ointment to his own razor burns. Before I fully comprehend what this may mean, he collapses onto the deck, my canister rolling out toward the assistant coach. The coach picks it up, even as people jump over the railing from the stands to attend the fallen Whopper.

Everyone in the showers saw that canister. They’ll have little trouble connecting it to me, even if both Garson and Whopper die.

As the crowds gather around my two dying teammates on the pool deck and the scream of an anguished parent erupts from the stands, I make my turn into the final stroke, the freestyle leg. My best stroke. The familiarity of the motion calms me. My natural state.

No one else swims now, no bodies in the pool save mine, and the water is smooth as glass. I am the last, a lone competitor with a hundred yards to go. A cool-down swim, really, done at a leisurely pace to enjoy exquisite, athletic motion.

A last taste of freedom. They will be waiting for me when I finish. Waiting with questions I cannot answer.

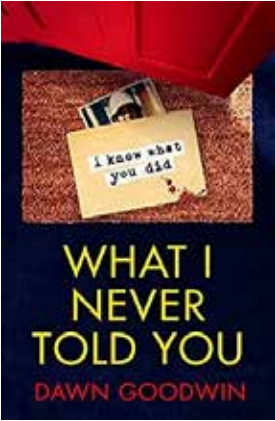
A hundred yards left. Less than minute to traverse, even in a leisurely swim.

Less than a minute.  
The cage is waiting.

*The author would like to thank Dr. J.S. Savage for his help with poison research for this story.*

**William Burton McCormick is a Shamus, Derringer, and Claymore awards finalist whose fiction regularly appears in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and elsewhere. He is the author of the historical novel of the Baltic Republics *Lenin’s Harem*, the modern financial thriller *KGB Banker* (with whistleblower John Christmas), and the historical suspense thriller novella *A Stranger from the Storm*. A native of Nevada, William has lived in seven countries including Latvia, Russia, Estonia, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine for writing purposes. Learn more about him at [williamburtonmccormick.com](http://williamburtonmccormick.com).**

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



### What I Never Told You Dawn Goodwin

A tale of deception and suspense that straddles two time periods, this mystery from new author Dawn Goodwin pulls in readers right from the opening chapters.

Helen Whitmore does her best to balance work and life in her small English community. When her step-son, Matt, brings a guest home one evening, it ruffles a few feathers. Diana is

not only beautiful, but also has a conniving side.

Meanwhile, Helen is struggling when an old photograph emerges, along with some taunting secret notes. The two girls in the photo are well-known to Helen. She is one of them. The other died in a mysterious manner.

Helen has flashbacks to her youth, but must also deal with present-day drama. Diana has turned up dead, and everyone in her home has a motive for killing her. It will bring a

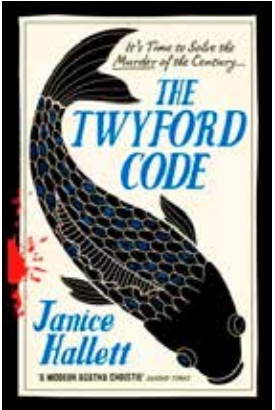
flood of old emotions to the surface for Helen, forcing her to confront sentiments she long ago buried.

Goodwin masters the dual timeline, telling two independent, yet interwoven, stories. The piece flows well and keeps the twists coming until the final chapters, allowing readers to engage in both the plot and the characters that push it along. The mystery builds and the tension heightens until it all comes crashing together at the climax.

Helen is surely a strong protagonist. The reader learns much about her and the struggles she has overcome, as well as the layers of secrets she has been forced to keep. The novel is written in such a way that the reader gets pieces of teen and adult Helen throughout, allowing one to build an idea of how she has become the woman she is today. Key characters emerged in both stories and connections could be found where they were needed, with strong development throughout.

This first impact was a good one, and readers will look forward to adding more of Goodwin’s work to their “to read” lists in the future.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



### The Twyford Code Janice Hallett

Steve Smith has just been released from prison after an eleven-year stint for murder. Illiterate when he went in, he’s learned to read and write and is determined not to return to his former life of crime.

He also wants to solve the mystery of what happened to his favourite high school Remedial English teacher, Alice Isles, who

disappeared on a day trip to Cornwall with his class.

When he was 14, Steve found an old children’s book on a bus. The teacher recognised the author, Edith Twyford, a popular writer in the 1930s who wrote about a group of six children and their adventures. Despite Twyford’s books now being banned from school libraries because of their inherent racism and sexism, she read it to the class and later took them to Cornwall to visit the locations in the book—before suddenly disappearing and leaving the bewildered children to find their own way home.

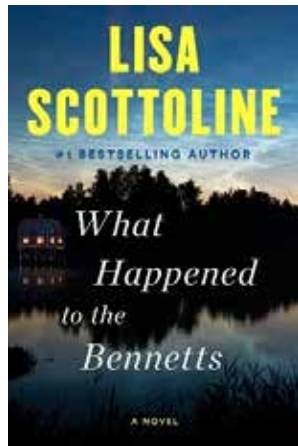
Now reconnecting with old friends from that class, Steve discovers that many of Twyford’s readers, including Miss Isles, believed a secret code embedded in the book would lead to a hidden treasure. His gang of six sets out to crack the code and solve the mystery of Miss Isles’ disappearance.

This is a very original mystery, meticulously planned and written in an unusual style. In her debut novel, *The Appeal*, Hallett presented a narrative composed of emails, letters, social media postings, newspaper articles and police reports. Here, the story is told through transcripts of recordings made on an old iPhone. The transcripts lead to some phonetic spellings, but readers will quickly get used to it.

This format becomes addictive reading, especially as Steve’s obsession about finding Miss Isles morphs into something deeper. He shows himself to be much smarter than people give him credit for as he carries out a plan he has had eleven years to perfect. There is also a lot of subtle humour in the recordings, and the twisty ending is sure to delight, all adding up to a hugely engrossing and intriguing, fun read.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott





## What Happened to the Bennetts

Lisa Scottoline

Jason Bennett is driving home one night with his wife and two children when they are carjacked by a dangerous man. His teenage daughter, Alison, is killed. Jason and his wife Lucinda are put into witness protection, along with their son, without any time to tell their family and friends.

Broken-hearted, Jason and Lucinda live under the supervision of the FBI. When the shooter's identity is revealed, they hope they will find peace. But the shooter is involved in an even wider conspiracy involving a drug-dealing gang, a high-powered lawyer, even the FBI. Jason, unsure who to trust, sets out on his own to get justice for his daughter, risking his life along the way.

Lisa Scottoline's highly addictive novel *What Happened to the Bennetts* is a page-turning, pulse-pounding story full of

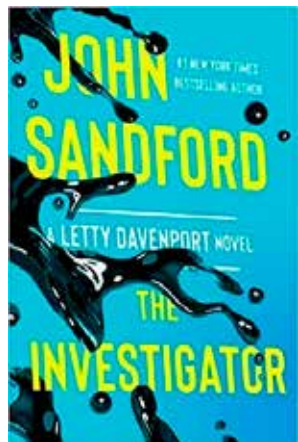
family drama, intrigue, and conspiracy. Scottoline not only encapsulates the all-encompassing grief of a parent losing a child, but has readers with their hairs standing on end with the non-stop action and suspense!

A family man, Jason will stop at nothing to seek justice within a broken system. From heartbreak to anger to pure satisfaction, Scottoline has her characters run the entire gamut of emotions, bringing the reader along for the ride.

Each chapter ends on a suspenseful cliffhanger. Scottoline's well-researched plot pulls the reader deep into the corrupt legal and judicial system, including the FBI and the WITSEC program, building even more of a connection between the reader and the Bennett family.

Fans of Scottoline will not be disappointed, as this book has everything her lifelong readers have come to expect. Fans of taut and gripping legal dramas will be unable to put this novel down! Relatable, honest characters and a well-developed plot loaded with action and suspense, *What Happened to the Bennetts* is a must-read for 2022!

Reviewed by Erin Clemence



## The Investigator

John Sandford

John Sanford brings investigation, suspense, and plenty of action to the first book in the Letty Davenport series. Letty has had an unconventional, tragic, and violent childhood mixed with her beneficial adoption by Lucas Davenport, the protagonist in the author's Prey series.

She's now twenty-four, a graduate of Stanford, and working for Senator Christopher Colles. Letty is bored until she is offered a position as a liaison between the senator's office and the Department of Homeland Security. In her first assignment, she is partnered with investigator John Kaiser on a case involving missing oil.

Letty is smart and lean with a somewhat warped sense of humor and a tendency to be rash at times. She also takes after Lucas in several ways, including her proficiency and knowledge of guns and her love of fashion. John and Letty start out on somewhat rocky ground when they first meet, but this is soon resolved by showing their areas of expertise and how they balance one another. Their personalities and approaches to an investigation are somewhat different, but they quickly

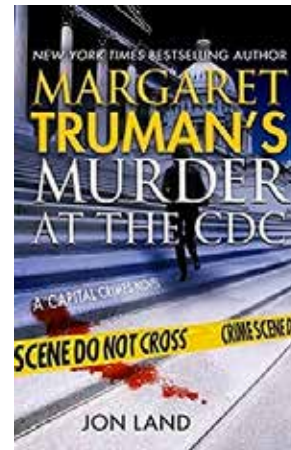
learn to trust and depend on each other. Both characters have depth and show growth.

The story is part investigation and part action thriller. The opening is memorable and, starting with chapter three, readers get the occasional point of view of the antagonists, rather than the entire book being from Letty's perspective.

Sandford's writing is always great. This story is fluid and flows well. His world-building is fantastic. There's a strong sense of place; readers will feel transported to Texas and its border towns, as though living the events alongside the characters. Sandford is a superb storyteller who keeps readers on the edge of their seats as the investigation and action unfold. The final action scenes are riveting and hauntingly memorable. The conflict is seen from different angles as readers get insight from both Letty and the antagonists. It is very relevant and has a terrifying realism to it. Themes include violence, murder, immigration, childhood trauma, theft, security, and much more.

Overall, this was suspenseful, unsettling, and action-packed with compelling characters. With a heart-rending plot, exciting scenes, and fascinating story, it will captivate and terrify readers. It's a great start to a series, and readers will look forward to reading more about Letty and her future assignments.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



## Murder at the CDC

Jon Land & Margaret Truman

Long-time fans of this Margaret Truman series were saddened to learn of her death. However, Jon Land has done a fabulous job maintaining the flow of the series, keeping the attention on Robert Brixton, its protagonist.

When lawyer Mackenzie Smith asks Brixton to look into whether a young woman is actually an illegitimate child of his, things proceed with

caution and ease. During their meeting, Brixton has no doubt that Smith has a daughter, but remains cautious about revealing too much.

Brixton is soon distracted when a shooting on the steps of the Capitol involves his grandson's classroom. When the teen cannot be contacted, Brixton rushes to the scene to help. He connects with Kelly Luftus of the Capitol Police's Protective Services, who thinks that she might have a link to the shooter. She runs some leads, and Brixton adds some intriguing information his grandson has revealed as well.

A short time later, Smith calls Brixton to explain that his daughter has been rushed to Walter Reed, a victim of an apparent poisoning. In a panic, Smith wants answers as his paternal side rises to the surface. Brixton and Luftus soon discover there is more to the story than just the Capitol shooting: a number of students at the school were poisoned and died recently.

All the while, at a secret facility in Colorado, a man is harvesting what he calls the most deadly toxin ever. He's planning to release it, which could decimate the population in one day, though no one is aware of his plan. As Brixton and Luftus hone their investigation, it will only be a matter of time before the pieces come together, but will it be too late?

The introduction of Kelly Loftus provides some spin and leaves the door open to see if they will collaborate in the future. By adding some personal impact to Brixton, Land allows his protagonist to grow and show a softer side, if not one that shows what fuels him on a regular basis. Loftus keeps things from being too predictable and leaves readers wondering where future novels by the author might land, if you pardon the pun.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey

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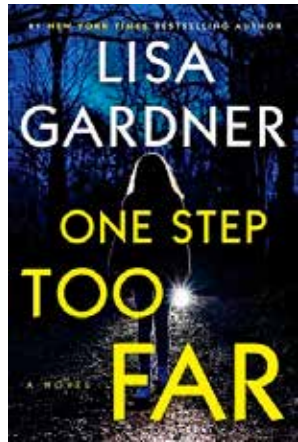
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## One Step Too Far

Lisa Gardner

Frankie Elkin has few friends, few regrets, and the heart of a wanderer. She searches for missing people long after they disappear, when everyone else has given up. *One Step Too Far* has Frankie on the search for Tim O'Day, who has been missing for five years in the Popo Agie Wilderness in Wyoming. She joins a yearly search crew headed by Tim's

grieving father, Martin, after one member of the crew falls ill the night before the search begins.

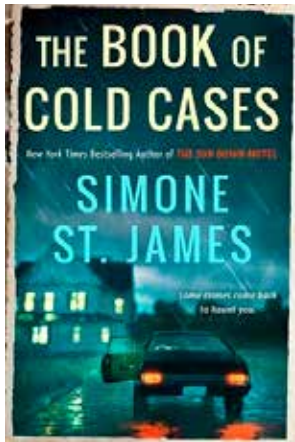
Tim went missing while camping with his four college buddies as his bachelor party. Frankie is on the team with the man's three remaining friends, Tim's dad, a local wilderness expert, a Bigfoot hunter with a big heart, and a search and rescue member and her cadaver dog, Daisy. Frankie learns quickly that, except for Daisy, each person is carrying a multitude of secrets. Quickly into the story, the search team becomes the hunted and Frankie must use her survival skills

to get off the mountain and to safety before she becomes the next missing person.

Sometimes in novels that feature a large group of people, it's hard to learn what each person is about. Gardner does an amazing job with Frankie interviewing each character, several of whom are not happy to be there at all. By the end of the book, readers will care about each one of them, especially the three friends Tim had been with when he disappeared. While initially they are cold, Frankie is able to get them to open up about what happened and who Tim O'Day really was. As the story progresses, they start to include her and her quirkiness. Gardner writes as if Frankie is a friend the reader is getting to know. Some of her history is explained so we can understand why she does what she does and how she is so good at it: sixteen successful expeditions. Readers will root for the underdog to be safe and make it down the mountain, knowing she is battling an unknown killer.

This book has everything readers could ask for in a great mystery: secrets, suspense, excellent pace, and great characters. There is a twist that will make the reader go back and read certain parts until it all makes sense.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



## The Book of Cold Cases

Simone St. James

Simone St. James is the master of pairing the paranormal with reality and making it both intriguing and believable. In her newest novel, St. James writes about a true crime blogger, Shea, who is looking into The Lady Killer Murders.

One of the most infamous crimes in her small town of Claire Lake, the murders were sensational and drew in the public because of their stunning and unlikely murder suspect.

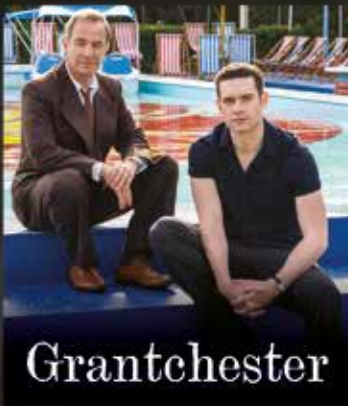
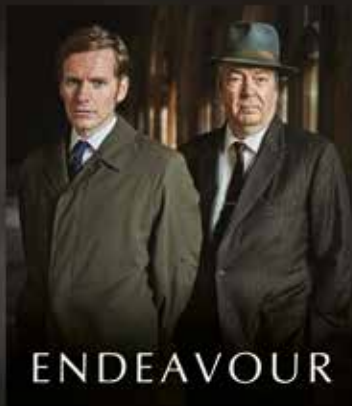
Beth Greer, accused of the crime, is beautiful, rich, and completely cold. It is easy to see how she was convicted in the court of public opinion, but Shea thinks there is more to the story than meets the eye. When she meets Beth by chance, she can't pass up the opportunity to try to set the record straight. Beth invites Shea to her mansion, and Shea can't help but be curious about what she will find.

The mansion is anything but normal. Things move around when Shea isn't looking, she hears strange voices, and she sees the wisp of a girl outside the window. The mansion is kept exactly the same as it was in 1978, right down to Beth's mother's face cream on the nightstand. Even though she is terrified, Shea can't help but want to hunt down what is lurking in the darkness.

*The Book of Cold Cases* is expertly written and completely immersive. St. James knows how to keep a reader's attention, and they will be hooked from the very first page. The contrast of mysterious and alluring Beth against awkward and terrified Shea is fun to read about and easy to picture. The characters in this book are unique and dynamic, making readers want to learn more about them. With her haunting prose, St. James writes an atmospheric and disturbing book that will keep readers guessing until the end. If you liked her previous books, you'll want to pick up this one as soon as possible.

Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann

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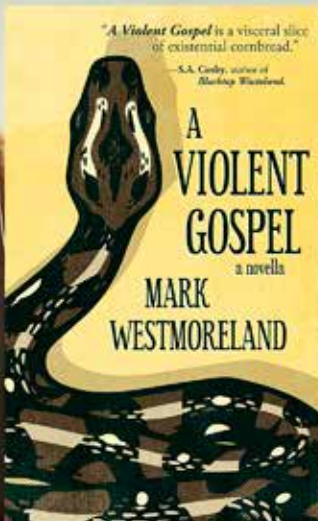
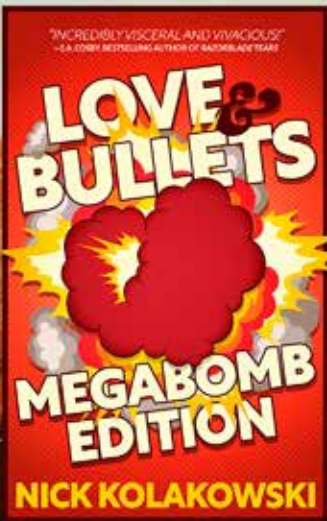
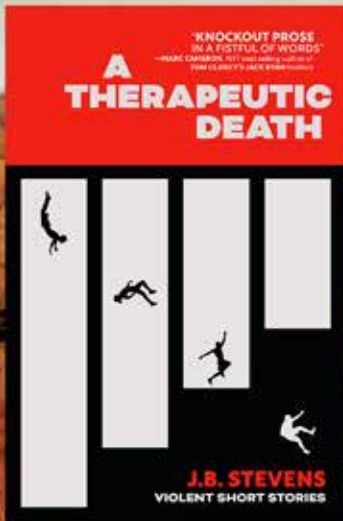
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## The Replacement Wife

Darby Kane

Josh seems to be a man who is unlucky when it comes to love. His first wife, Candace, died when she fell and hit her head after they'd only been married for five years. Now his fiancé, Abby, has disappeared.

Josh claims she must have gotten cold feet about the wedding and run away. But Elisa, married to Josh's older brother

Harris and Abby's best friend, can't accept that Abby would cut all ties to her, too. No one, not even her own parents, has heard from Abby for seven months, and Elisa is worried that something bad has happened to her. When she finds out the supposedly grieving Josh has a new girlfriend, who he has been dating for months, her suspicions that Josh is involved in Abby's disappearance are fuelled even further.

The problem is that no one will listen to Elisa's concerns. A year ago, she was involved in a very traumatic shooting at the hospital where she worked. Since then, she has been

prone to panic attacks and scared to leave the house. She often feels anxious and her brain is foggy, even though her medication shouldn't be having that effect by now. Harris has blinders on when it comes to his younger brother. Josh is extremely talented at deflecting blame, as well as gas-lighting Elisa, making her out to be confused to the point where she also starts to doubt her own perception of events. This all makes her into a very unreliable narrator and leaves the reader wondering what is really going on.

Worried for the safety of Josh's new girlfriend, Rachel, Elisa is determined to continue looking for Abby, compelled to find out the truth about what happened to her best friend.

The premise for the novel is interesting. An occasional chapter from an unknown narrator is intriguing and alerts us to the fact that someone else has plans for Josh. Although considering himself a smooth operator, Josh is clearly unlikeable and untrustworthy to the reader, so it is no surprise when further secrets about his past are revealed. Overall, the novel is an entertaining mystery and could make a good holiday read.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



## The Matchmaker

Paul Vidich

With this spy thriller set in the dying days of the Cold War, Paul Vidich transports readers to a divided Germany, where tensions still run high along the seam of the Iron Curtain.

It's 1989 and Europe is about to make a seismic shift. In Berlin, things are teetering on the brink. Anne Simpson receives word that her husband's wallet

has been found along the banks of the river. Sure that he is away at work as a piano tuner, she is baffled, but the American consular official makes it clear that something is amiss.

Anne learns that her husband, Stefan, may have been working for the Matchmaker, an East German counterintelligence official wanted by the CIA for his known association with the KGB. Now, Anne must wonder if her entire marriage was a farce and discover how her husband plays into a Cold War game of political chess.

As Anne wrestles with the truth about her husband, she is thrust into the CIA's investigation as the only person who has actually seen the Matchmaker, years before, when she was


introduced to Stefan. Now she comes under scrutiny as the Agency pushes for answers, while Berlin becomes the symbolic epicenter of a crumbling Communist empire.

As Anne delves deeper into the past few years, tidbits of the narrative surrounding their marriage and chance encounter become key parts of the puzzle around the plan set in motion by the Matchmaker.

Paul Vidich not only paints an intense picture with his words, but also places the reader at the heart of the East-West divide in the waning days of the Cold War. With so many layers that must be revealed, this book is not for the reader who seeks a quick and simple read, but rewards those who want something that adds tension and confusion. Well-developed characters bring much to the story, adding depth to the political side of things.

Vidich does a great job stirring up emotions and intrigue, perfect for those whose love spy thrillers with political flavoring. With a great narrative and powerful plot twists, the story comes to life and all is slowly revealed by the final chapter. This surely lives up to the standards of Graham Greene and John le Carré, as denoted in the dust jacket blurb.

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



# THE BUS TO BEULAH

A NOVEL

E.C. HANES

“Human trafficking and illegal immigration are rived by what we know to be true of the other side of history - the power and corruption found on this side of the border. Hanes’ prose gives us the opportunity to find familiar stories and lives in each of the characters of this contemporary story, full of action and intrigue...”

-MARINA ALEMAN, Executive Director, Acción Hispana - Que Pasa

Pbk: 978-1-68463-129-2  
Ebook: B09CYBPWXV  
Pub Date: May 10, 2022  
Published by SparkPress  
Distributed by Ingram Publisher Services



## Long Gone

Joanna Schaffhausen

Last year, Joanna Schaffhausen introduced a new heroine and a new series: Annalisa Vega, Chicago detective, honest, upright, and hardworking. Now in 2021, they're back to bring readers the next entry in the series—and if you love a mystery, *Long Gone* has got just the twisty intrigue for you.

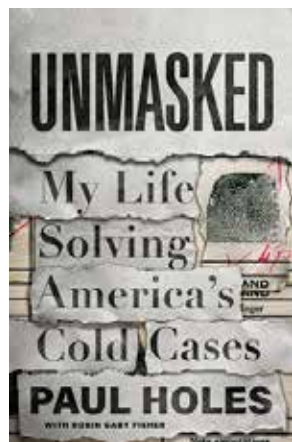
Annalisa's life was detonated in spectacular fashion at the end of the first book, and the fallout continues even as the shooting death of a veteran detective ignites a new case for our heroine and her partner and ex-husband, Nick Carelli. At first, it appears the detective's young second wife knows more than she's telling, especially when she tells a wild story of an intruder in full diving gear shooting her husband. But it soon becomes apparent the dead man had plenty of secrets and people with reasons to want him dead. One thing's for sure: no one—not even Detective Vega—could have predicted where this case would lead.

Joanna Schaffhausen is somehow getting better with every novel she releases. *Long Gone* has so much going on, but she makes it easy to follow multiple threads—it never gets messy or feels like too much. She's also got a way of writing her characters that makes them feel so real; little moments of dialogue, or self-doubt, details that round a person out and cement them as an individual. Hers are not infallible investigative geniuses receiving implausible strokes of inspiration from nowhere. They're hardworking, caring people putting in the work and doing their best. The writing is easy to read and enjoyable, with a flow that makes it feel like a much shorter book than it was.

As with Schaffhausen's other novels, *Long Gone* is part of a series, though it could also be read as a standalone, and there's no wrong place to jump into her novels. If you're after a thriller that will deliver on the suspense, give you characters to cheer on, and wrap it all up with a thoroughly satisfying conclusion, look no further.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook





## Unmasked

Paul Holes

If you ever harbored any delusions that monsters weren't real, *Unmasked* will shatter them. The fact is that monsters are out there—watching, stalking their next victim, preparing to strike as quickly as a cobra before fleeing.

What do monsters look like? Like the guy in your grocery store, a coach playing ball with your kids, a co-worker sharing

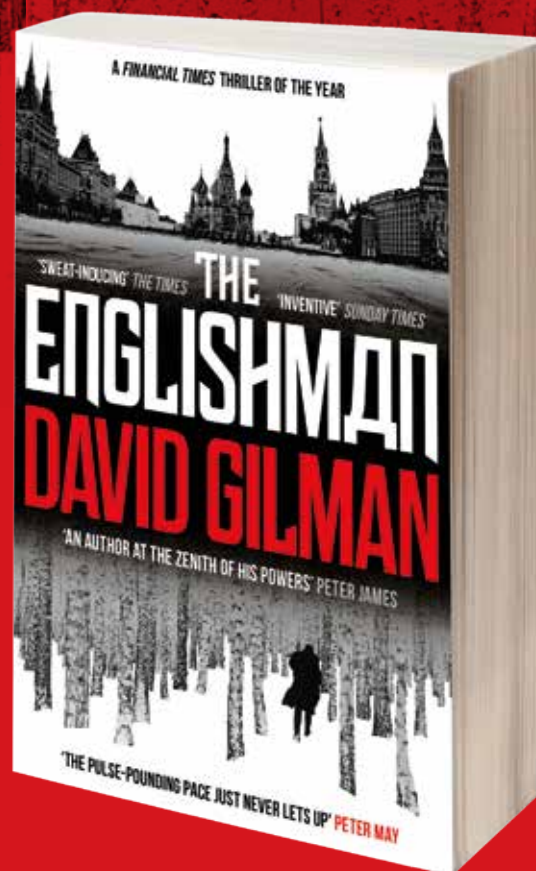
a cup of coffee, a member of your church. Monsters wear many ordinary disguises while destroying lives, leaving victims and families scarred for life.

*Unmasked: My Life Solving America's Cold Cases* is the memoir of a master criminologist who's made it his life's mission to solve cold cases by unmasking the monsters that have eluded authorities for years. And he does so by following the scientific evidence piece by piece. It's the career story of Paul Holes: his early years working in a lab when he first discovered a cabinet of cold case files, including the Golden State Killer's, and realized what he wanted to do—what he

had to do—with his life, continuing as he moved up the professional ranks, honing his skills as a forensic scientist, to the later years as he came to understand that his obsession was what he was born to do ... no matter the cost to his personal life. Holes, an admitted introvert, opens the door to his soul and allows readers to ride along as he relives some of his highest-profile cases. He speaks candidly of his panic attacks and nightmares of mutilated bodies, his deteriorating personal life, his ever-burning need to solve cold cases and bring closure to victims and families.

*Unmasked* is a stunning, brutally honest memoir about a complex, highly gifted forensic scientist who sacrificed his personal life, even his marriage and fatherhood, in his relentless pursuit of monsters. This book entertains like fiction because it's brilliantly delivered in an all-engrossing format, at a pace that makes it impossible to put down, and because it's still so hard to comprehend the depravity of some sick humans. From start to finish, he grips readers and transports them behind the scenes of real investigations, demonstrating firsthand the manner in which forensic science is used to unmask criminals.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



ISBN: 9781838931414 HEADOFFZEUS.COM

THE ENGLISHMAN DAVID GILMAN

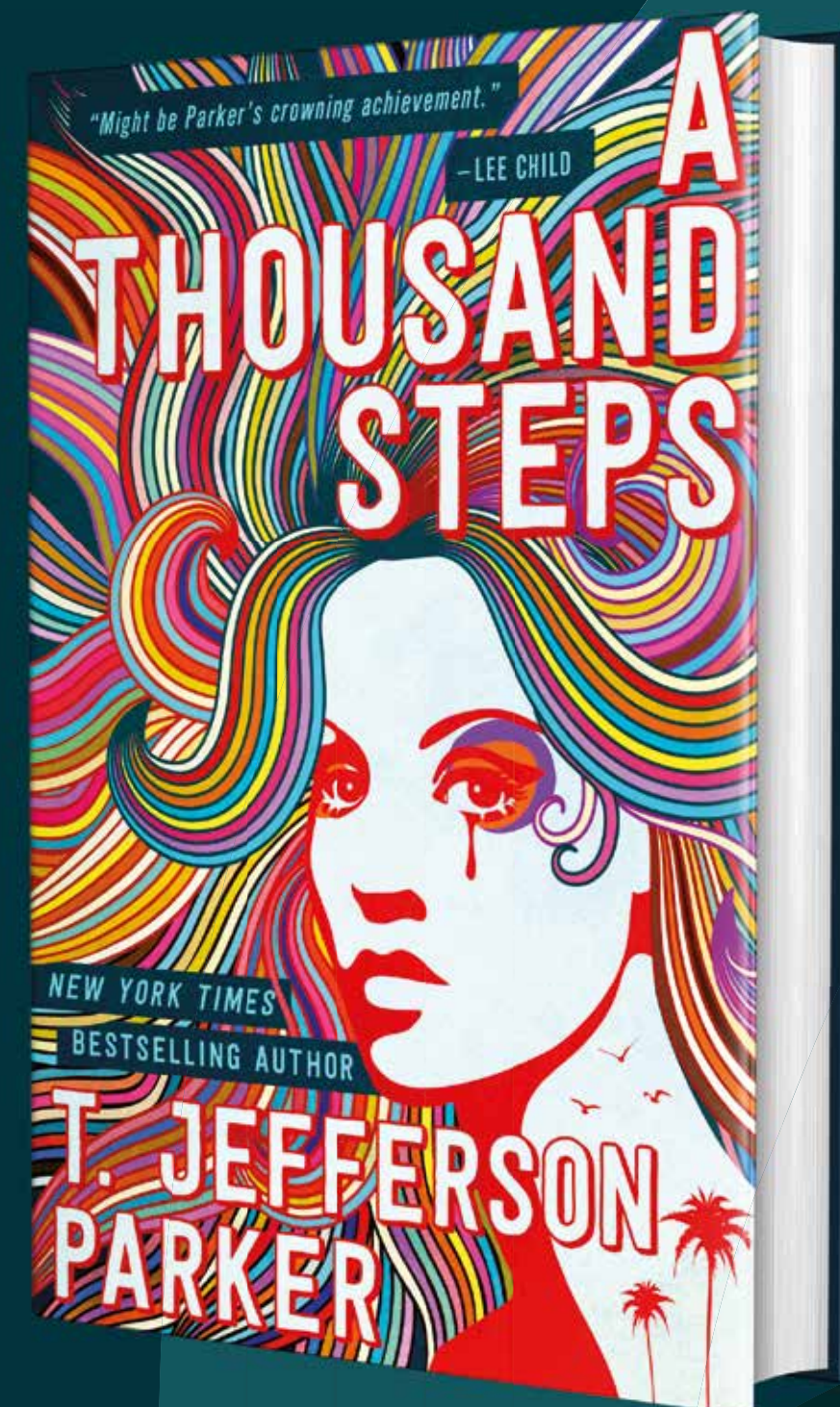


# FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR T. JEFFERSON PARKER

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