

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

N°07 - SUMMER 2022
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Feature: Aliens in Thrillers
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**Author Q&As: John Sandford,
Blake Crouch, Karin Slaughter,
and more**

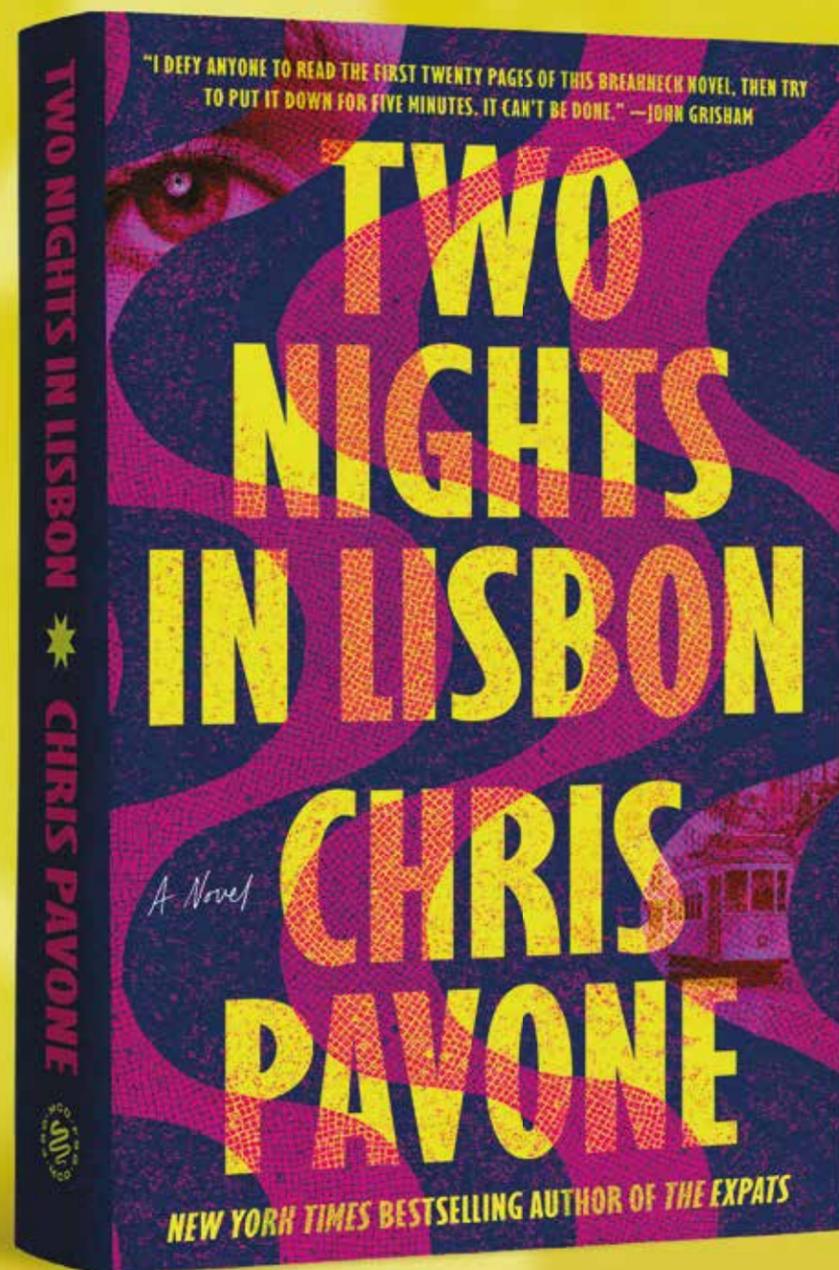
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**Feature: The Best Legal
Thriller Adaptations**
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**Short Fiction:
"If You Say So"**
.....

**Reviews: *The Ravaged*,
The Golden Couple, and more**

I believe

THE MUST READ BOOK OF SUMMER 2022



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—LEE CHILD

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If we had to summarize this issue in one word?
Thrillers.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

Another great magazine is in store for you, readers, especially if you're a fan of thrillers. Sure, we've got a smattering of horror in this issue; more than a little mystery and crime; and suspense is in every page. But thrillers: that's where it's at in this issue!

From the cover story (I mean, who doesn't love aliens in thrillers?) to the last page, this is a thriller-lover's magazine. We've got legal thrillers, nannies in thrillers. We've got thriller authors, from Karin Slaughter to Steve Berry. We've got thriller reviews and thriller fiction. It's really just unfair how thrilling this edition of the magazine is.

So, whether you love reading crime thrillers on the beach, or jet-setting on a vacation with an international conspiracy thriller, we've got your summer covered.

All the best,
Sam

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IN EVERY PERSON'S STORY,
THERE IS
SOMETHING TO HIDE...

ONE OF BOOKRIOT'S 15 BEST NEW MYSTERIES OF 2022

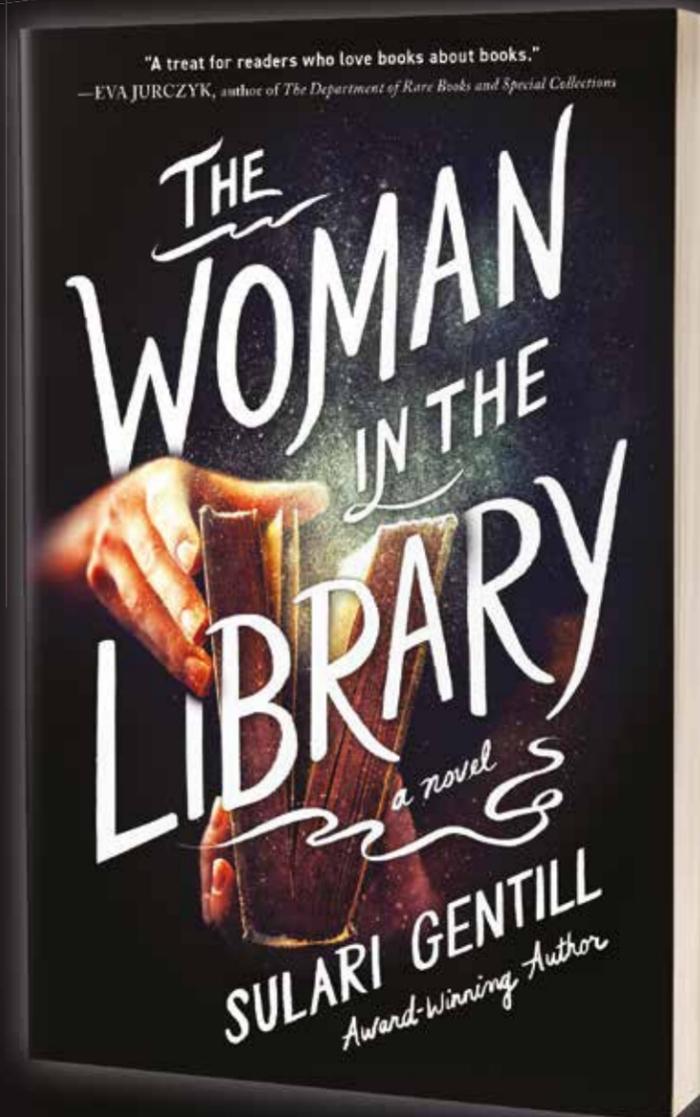


"THRILLING."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY,
STARRED Review

"A PAGE-TURNER
from beginning to end."

—NEW YORK JOURNAL
OF BOOKS





Blake Crouch
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Blake Crouch

Blake Crouch is a bestselling novelist and screenwriter. He is the author of a dozen novels, most recently, *Dark Matter*, *Recursion*, and *Upgrade*, for which he is also writing the movie for Steven Spielberg's Amblin Partners. His international-best-selling *Wayward Pines* trilogy was adapted into a television series for FOX, executive produced by M. Night Shyamalan, that was summer 2015's #1 show. With Chad Hodge, Crouch also created *Good Behavior*, the TNT show starring Michelle Dockery based on his Letty Dobesh novellas.

Q. The future described in *Upgrade* is bleak—full of famine, inflation, shortages, climate change, and more. Outside of the story, what are your thoughts on the direction humanity is heading?

Blake: I have three children who are inheriting an infinitely more complex, interconnected, and terrifying world than I grew up in. The existential threats we face are myriad, many of them technology-driven, many of them human-behavior driven. I am deeply concerned with the direction our species is heading, and if we don't do something to right the ship in short order, the future looks incredibly bleak. I didn't set out to write about this in *Upgrade*. I just wanted to write a cool story about gene-editing. But once I dove in, the state of our world intruded.

Q. One of my favorite details in *Upgrade* is the reference to specific genes and how those affect our protagonist's expressed genetic traits. What did your research for the story look like?

Blake: The research was far and away the most challenging I've ever undertaken. Luckily, I found a tremendous subject matter expert by the name of Michael Wiles, who is a molecular geneticist. Dr. Wiles read several iterations of my early, ungainly manuscripts and helped to make the science as realistic and plausible as possible. The research involved countless conversations about the state of gene-editing technology now, and what it might be in several decades assuming the current rate of technological progression.

Q. Now that Amblin Partners has acquired the screen rights to *Upgrade* and you're attached as executive producer, there's buzz about a future adaptation. What can you tell us about the process or future for this project?

Blake: All I can say at the moment is that I am over the moon to be working with Amblin on this adaptation. I can't wait to get started on the script.

Q. How did writing *Upgrade* compare with your other major hits?

Blake: Brutal. Just brutal. I thought that with *Recursion* I had set a high bar for how difficult a book could be, but I discovered a new level of pain with *Upgrade*. The challenge was very different from *Recursion*, where I discovered in my first draft I had written myself into several blind alleys. Here,

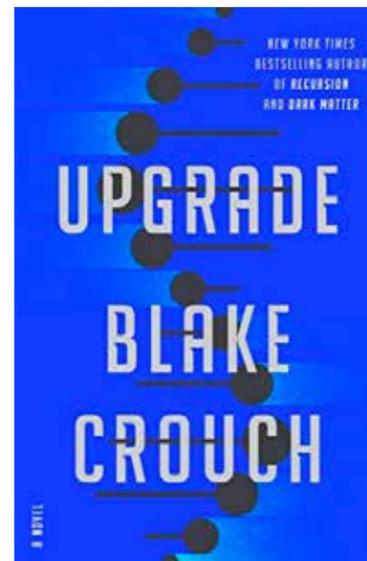
the challenge was the science of DNA, and how to dramatize a story that is inherently interior. What I mean by that is Logan's journey is one of incredible change at the molecular level, which impacts how he sees the world, his family, himself, his goals. Figuring out how to make that exciting was an intense hurdle.

Q. When you're not writing, what do you do for fun?

Blake: I love the outdoors—trail-running, mountain-biking, skiing. And I love to travel, because it fuels my creativity like nothing else.

Q. What's next?

Blake: A new book and the *Upgrade* film adaptation!



Blake Crouch's latest: *Upgrade*

At first, Logan Ramsay isn't sure if anything's different. He just feels a little ... sharper. Better able to concentrate. Better at multitasking. Reading a bit faster, memorizing better, needing less sleep.

But before long, he can't deny it: Something's happening to his brain. To his body. He's starting to see the world, and those around him—even those he loves most—in whole new ways.

The truth is, Logan's genome has been hacked. And there's a reason he's been targeted for this upgrade. A reason that goes back decades to the darkest part of his past, and a horrific family legacy.

Worse still, what's happening to him is just the first step in a much larger plan, one that will inflict the same changes on humanity at large—at a terrifying cost.

Because of his new abilities, Logan's the one person in the world capable of stopping what's been set in motion. But to have a chance at winning this war, he'll have to become something other than himself. Maybe even something other than human.

And even as he's fighting, he can't help wondering: what if humanity's only hope for a future really does lie in engineering our own evolution?

NURTURE OR NIGHTMARE?

Nannies in Thrillers

BY MONICA MCGURK

Nannies, governesses, nurses. Whatever you call them, literature is littered with these discreet caregivers. If they aren't nameless cogs in the domestic machinery, losing identity and purpose once the children are gone (like the nanny in *Brideshead Revisited*), they often play the clichéd role of magical savior to a troubled family—think *Mary Poppins* or *Nurse Matilda*.

But in mysteries and thrillers, these tropes are upended as the nanny herself emerges from the background as a real threat to the family's safety, or perhaps holding the key to solving a crucial crime. And why not? Nannies are perfectly poised at the center of a family, with all its intrigues and secrets, to add just the right dash of observation and suspense to any thriller. They slip across class boundaries and take advantage of their unassuming role, connecting dots and putting domestic dramas in motion. And these nannies are everywhere. In fact, by one count, nearly a quarter of Agatha Christie's detective novels counted a governess among the characters!

Three types of nannies dominate the mystery and thriller genres: the psychologically deranged and criminal nanny; the brave innocent who unwittingly stumbles into—and rises above—danger; and the nanny as a mystery-solving sleuth. Here are some examples of these nannies in action.

PSYCHOTIC, CRIMINAL THREATS

Recent thrillers and mysteries take a sinister view of nannies. These fears are not new, however. They can be traced directly to Henry James's 1898 novella, *The Turn of the Screw*, a psychological thriller in which one is never sure if the unnamed governess is truly protecting her young charges in the face of supernatural terror or has, herself, gone mad. They find a violent precursor in Evelyn Piper's *The Nanny*

(1965), in which the titular character (played chillingly by Bette Davis in its film adaptation) turns to poisoning, drowning, and suffocation. And they build upon Robert Tine's 1992 novelization of the film, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, in which a woman poses as a nanny to avenge the loss of her own husband and unborn child.

Perhaps these books speak to class guilt and modern discomfort with the employment of nannies. Maybe they tap into the angst of the working mother, playing upon the fear of being displaced in one's children's affection. In any case, nannies in this mode are a threat to domestic bliss. The nannies in these thrillers are depicted as deranged, actively exploiting their position to undermine families, even to the point of murder.

First among the recent batch is Leila Slimani's *The Perfect Nanny* (2018). This book starts with a bang, four stark words jolting you into tragedy: "The baby is dead." Complicated constructs of class, race, domesticity, work, and motherhood drive Paul and Myriam to hire and become increasingly dependent upon their nanny, Louise. Louise's unassuming demeanor disguises a precarious existence on the knife's edge of poverty. Marginalized, afraid, and yearning to be needed, Louise slips, bit by bit, into desperation, reaching a shocking breaking point.

Next up is Gilly Macmillan's *The Nanny* (2020). Newly widowed and broke, Jocelyn grudgingly returns from California to her mother's stately home in England to rebuild a life with her young daughter. Old tensions between daughter and mother, village and aristocrats resurface as a skull is fished out of the lake behind the house. When Jocelyn's beloved nanny—who disappeared in the night decades earlier, and to whom Jocelyn fears the found skull belonged—resurfaces, family secrets begin to unravel. Told from four competing perspectives, including that of the nanny, the story builds a suffocating sense of psychological and literal threat.

The Turn of the Key by Ruth Ware (2019) is a modernized homage to James's *The Turn of the Screw*, with a high-tech renovated haunted house. Rowan/Rachel, the nanny protagonist, finds her own grip on reality tested after being overwhelmed by the "smart home" gone awry, ultimately landing in jail, accused of murdering one of the children. She seeks legal help to prove her innocence, unraveling the truth of what has been happening in the Elincourt home.

Further afield in the fantasy/horror genre is the supernatural threat of the monster/nanny character, Ursula Monkton, in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (Neil Gaiman, 2013). Monkton jumps realms, "hitchhiking" her way into the



narrator's world and ingratiating herself into his family. The child narrator winds up increasingly alienated while he vainly struggles to make his family understand the risk that only he can see, providing a new twist on the psychology of this trope. Ursula battles him all the way, proving herself a formidable foe.

If the governesses in the foreground of these novels are evil and monstrous, others show as "mere" criminal suspects, questioned due to their proximity to a shocking accident or crime. Agatha Christie's detective novels offer several examples. These include the governess Genevieve Brun in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925). When her young charge disappears in an apparent kidnapping from the manor, the Chimneys, Brun inevitably comes under scrutiny as one of the suspects in an investigation that ultimately uncovers layers of assumed identities and plotting.

Another of Christie's characters, Vera Claythorne in the classic *And Then There Were None* (1939), is a former governess now working as a sports mistress at a girls' school. When she is mysteriously invited by an unknown benefactor—along with other, seemingly unrelated strangers—to spend a holi-

day week at Soldiers Island, she finds herself, like the other guests, accused of a heinous crime and her life at risk. Like most works by Christie, these are both fast-paced reads, studded with clues, brought to satisfying conclusions by grand reveals that tie up all loose ends.

The unbalanced, criminal depictions of the nannies above play upon our fear of unwittingly inviting a threat into the heart of our home. Some thrillers take a different tack, though, depicting governesses and nannies as heroic protagonists.

THE BRAVE INNOCENT

It is hard to erase the image of Jane Eyre walking the gothic halls of Thornfield, unearthing her employer's secrets. The calm intellect of her governess character has stirred the imaginations of generations of readers and set the stage for mysteries and thrillers that celebrate nannies' intelligence and agency. These heroines solve mysteries and prevent horrible crimes, thrust into the center of the plot as duty calls, often finding love along the way.

A perfect inheritor of the Jane Eyre tradition? *Nine Coaches Waiting*, Mary Stewart (1958). Beautifully descrip-

tive prose and sweeping, romantic settings make it a gothic romantic masterpiece. Penniless, orphaned governess Linda Martin joins the aristocratic Valmy family to take over duties for the young Comte, himself recently orphaned. A series of near-death incidents force Linda to confront the realities and dangers of her post and cause her to question a blossoming romance. Family secrets, financial misdeeds, and more bring the governess's charm, wit, quick thinking and pluck to the forefront. The winking tributes to *Jane Eyre* keep with the magnificent storytelling.

NANNY SLEUTHS

Other depictions of nanny heroines position them as proactive agents in the resolution of mysteries. These are not innocents unwittingly thrust into the center of the action, but women (for they are, typically women) who choose it, deliberately using their positions to solve and prevent crimes. Two great examples:

In *Anna, Where Are You?* (aka *Death at Deep End*, 1951) by Patricia Wentworth, the author's sleuth and series protagonist, Miss Silver, is a former governess who has moved on to a career as a private investigator. This novel provides a triple dose of nanny-dom, as Silver goes undercover as a nanny in order to solve the disappearance of yet another governess, combining espionage with the great country house tradition to great effect. A haunted house, loopy characters immersed in arts and crafts and spiritualism, a series of bank robberies, and a budding romance come together to challenge this no-nonsense sleuth as she cracks the case.

Princess Elizabeth's Spy by Susan Elia MacNeal (2012) finds codebreaking mathematician and would-be British spy Maggie Hope placed undercover as a math tutor to the young Princess Elizabeth to protect her from a Nazi plot. Maggie's American upbringing comes to the fore as she deals with royal etiquette, domestic intrigue at the castle, and the sexist attitudes of MI5 colleagues. Her heart-stopping adventures also yield plenty of romance and a resolution to the mystery surrounding her estranged father, himself a British spy. The second installment in the Maggie Hope Mystery series, this is a fun romp with a very modern sensibility and can be read on a standalone basis.

By virtue of being placed at the seat of class, economic, and political power, governess and nanny characters in literature are perfectly placed to play the role of hero or villain. In doing so, they upend trite depictions of them as perpetually sunny restorers of familial happiness. For good or evil, they propel the plots of mysteries and thrillers in unexpected ways, proving the adage that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" and giving readers a wild ride that belies the *Mary Poppins* image. Whether depicted as deranged criminals, wide-eyed innocents, or knowing sleuths, these nannies promise a window into mysteries and thrillers unlike any other, throwing in a good dose of upstairs-downstairs drama for good measure.



About the author

Award-winning author **Monica McGurk** weaves multi-layered stories that bring contemporary issues and strong female characters to life through different genres of popular fiction. Her newest release, *The Agency: The Norwood Nanny Chronicles Book One*, is squarely in the "nanny sleuth" tradition. Her work includes paranormal YA romance—*The Archangel Prophecies: Dark Hope, Dark Rising, and Dark Before Dawn*. A corporate executive, she lives in Chicagoland with her husband, youngest son, and their dog. Find her on monicamcgurk.com.



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Karin Slaughter is one of the world's most popular and acclaimed storytellers. Published in 120 countries with more than 35 million copies sold across the globe, her twenty-one novels include the Grant County and Will Trent books, as well as the Edgar-nominated *Cop Town* and the instant *New York Times* bestselling stand-alone novels *Pretty Girls*, *The Good Daughter*, and *Pieces of Her*. Slaughter is the founder of the Save the Libraries project—a nonprofit organization established to support libraries and library programming.

Q. Your 2018 bestseller, *Pieces of Her*, has just launched as a Netflix crime drama starring Toni Collette, David Wenham, Bella Heathcote, and Omari Hardwick. How involved were you with the production?

Karin: I felt so lucky to be included in a lot of the early discussions. Early on, the producers and the showrunner in particular reached out to me with questions about characters, motivations and various plot points. I got to read the scripts in various iterations. Before the pandemic, I flew to Los Angeles and met many of the writers and got to see all the spectacular snacks used to keep their brains chugging along. When they were filming in Atlanta, I went to the set and met the director, Minkie Spiro, who is an amazing lady, and got to see Bella doing a scene in a bookstore. As someone who basically sits for a living, it was amazing to see how everything comes together on film. There are so many moving pieces. And I have to say as an early fan of Matchbox cars I was delighted to see them working out where the cars go on the streets of downtown Atlanta by positioning toy cars on a table.

Q. The story of *Pieces of Her*, well-known to crime readers, starts when a woman's trip to a diner explodes into violence. How does the Netflix adaptation change to accommodate the screen?

Karin: There are only slight changes to the nuts and bolts, but I have to say I was awed by the emotion that Toni Collette and Bella Heathcote brought to the sequence. Bella has nailed Andy's ennui and self-deprecating sense of humor. She captures her aimlessness without coming across as feeling sorry for herself, which is a very delicate balance. Toni actually startled me in the opening because she did this wonderful thing that I hadn't even considered when I was writing—she puts her hand over Andy's eyes to protect her daughter from seeing this sudden flash of violence. That's a real “mom” thing to do, and I thought that set the tone for what happens next in a really fascinating way. When I am writing, I see it all in my head, but there's something more that an actor can bring to the interpretation that blows me away. If there's one thing about this experience that I've learned it's that so many more layers can be added in the hands of exceptional people.

Q. You've got a new thriller, *Girl, Forgotten*, coming this summer. What's it about?

Karin: It's about two things, really. There's one story set in the 1980s that follows a teenage girl named Emily Vaughn and her clique of friends. Then there's Andy's story—we meet her two years after the events of *Pieces of Her*. She's on her last day of training to become a United States Marshal. She's in a much more powerful position, and we see her learning how to be a good investigator. Her first case gets thrown at her by her scheming uncle Jasper. He wants Andrea to go back to Nick Harp's hometown and find evidence that Nick killed a girl forty years ago. That girl is Emily Vaughn.

Q. You grew up in a small town and now live in Atlanta. What does being a Southern writer mean to you? What do you love about Southern crime as a genre?

Karin: The thing I love most about the south I was raised in is that we were constantly reminded and taught about our history. I had amazing teachers who strived to give us a world-view outside of our small-town experience, and librarians who put exceptional books in our hands. Not only from a writing point of view, but from a human being point of view, I think knowing where you came from gives you a deeper understanding of where you are in the present.

As for Southern writers, we're all story tellers in some way. You can't even stop to get directions without hearing a story—“Go left at the house with the big dog, but be careful because that fella bit Mrs. Peterson last year and bless her heart, she's still walking with a limp ...” I grew up idolizing Flannery O'Connor. That southern gothic blend of darkness

and humor is writ large in my own work. I clearly remember reading *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker when I was a teenager and it totally changed my perspective. I think that's what good literature does, especially to kids—challenges who they are, makes them consider their place in the world, tells them that there are other points of view. And of course I think that Southern writers are particularly good at picking at the scab of the human condition.

Q. Beyond being a writer, you also started the non-profit Save The Libraries. What does it do, why is it important, and how can others help?

Karin: Primarily, my motivation is selfishness. I love the library now as much as I did when I was a child. I didn't come from a reading family, but my dad made sure I spent every Saturday in the library. It was my haven, a place where I could explore a life that I didn't think I'd ever have a chance to live—sailing a boat in the Mediterranean, exploring the Pyramids in Egypt, drinking tea in London, solving crimes with Nancy Drew, learning about how terrible it is to be a girl with Judy Blume. Books opened up a world to me that I would've never known existed. I'm not sure what would've happened to me if I hadn't had my local library. With Save the Libraries, I've got a chance to give back to the system that helped make me who I am.

Q. What are you working on now? What's next?

Karin: I've been talking to the GBI about a new story for Will and Sara. It's very exciting, but I can't tell you any more than that someone dies in the beginning, and by the end Will and Sara figure out who did it.



Karin Slaughter's latest: *Girl, Forgotten*

A girl with a secret ...

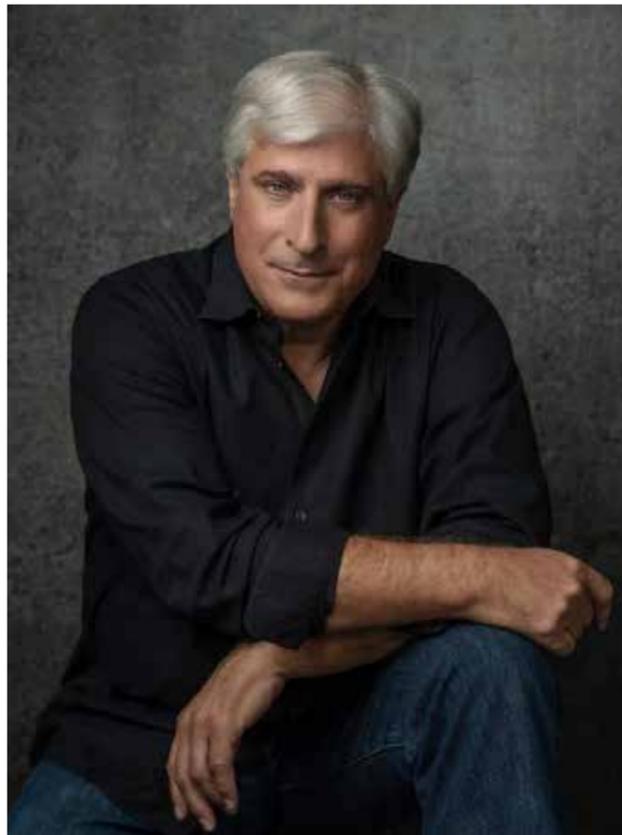
Longbill Beach, 1982. Emily Vaughn gets ready for the prom. For an athlete who is smart, pretty, and well-liked, this night should be the highlight of her high school career. But Emily has a secret. And by the end of the evening, that secret will be silenced forever.

An unsolved murder ...

Forty years later, Emily's murder remains a mystery. Her tight-knit group of friends closed ranks; her respected, wealthy family retreated inward; the small town moved on from her grisly attack. But all that's about to change.

One final chance to uncover a killer ...

U.S. Marshal Andrea Oliver arrives in Longbill Beach on her first assignment: to protect a judge receiving death threats. But, in reality, Andrea is there to find justice for Emily. The killer is still out there—and Andrea must discover the truth before she gets silenced, too.



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Steve Berry

Steve Berry is the *New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author of twenty novels, which include: *The Omega Factor*, *The Kaiser's Web*, *The Warsaw Protocol*, *The Malta Exchange*, *The Bishop's Pawn*, *The Lost Order*, *The 14th Colony*, *The Patriot Threat*, *The Lincoln Myth*, *The King's Deception*, *The Columbus Affair*, *The Jefferson Key*, *The Emperor's Tomb*, *The Paris Vendetta*, *The Charlemagne Pursuit*, *The Venetian Betrayal*, *The Alexandria Link*, *The Templar Legacy*, *The Third Secret*, *The Romanov Prophecy*, and *The Amber Room*.

Q. In *The Omega Factor*, readers are introduced to a new character, Nicholas Lee. Who is he?

Steve: Nick is a former-FBI agent who now works with the United Nations at UNESCO. He's the sole field investigator for CLIO (named for the muse of history), the Cultural Liaison and Investigative Office. His job is to protect the world's artistic and cultural treasures. Here, in his first adventure, Nick becomes entangled with the most vandalized, damaged, and stolen work of art in the world—the famed Ghent altarpiece. Nick has an interesting past, not the least of which is a woman whom is almost married, a person who now holds the key to everything. I've had Nick in my head for a number of years, so it was fun to finally bring him to life. The story is much like the Cotton Malone adventures—action, history, secrets, conspiracies—only with a new cast of characters who come with new motivations. All the Cotton Malone fans are going to love him.

Q. *The Omega Factor* takes readers from the canals of Belgium to the mountains, castles, and abbeys of France. Given your well-known love of travel as part of your research, how did you do it for this one?

Steve: Elizabeth and I traveled to Ghent and saw the altarpiece in all its glory. We also ventured to southern France and visited Toulouse, Carcassonne, and the 11th century Abbey of Saint-Martin-du-Canigou. That corner of the world is one of our favorite spots in the world.

Q. You've said in the past that you try to keep your historical thrillers 90 percent accurate. What truths is *The Omega Factor* based on? Who are the Maidens of Saint-Michael?

Steve: The maidens are wholly from my imagination, but most of the rest of the novel is taken straight from reality. That's the niche I've carved for myself. Something real from the past. Something people know little to nothing about. But

something they want to know more about and which still holds great relevance today. In this book we deal with the enigma of the Blessed Virgin, both the fact and fiction surrounding her. It's fascinating. For the reader I always include a Writer's Note in the back of the book that details what is true and what's not. So, after you finish the story, you can fill in the gaps and find all that out. But a word of warning. Don't read that note first, it will give away the whole plot.

Q. Just as Nicholas Lee travels the globe and protects the world's cultural treasures, you've built a charity called History Matters. What does it do?

Steve: Money for historic preservation and conservation is one of the first things to be cut from any budget. In 2009, my wife, Elizabeth, and I thought it was time to come up with an innovative way to raise preservation money. So History Matters was born. The most popular choice is a four-hour seminar that she and I teach where writers, aspiring writers, and readers buy their way in with a contribution. Usually, that's somewhere between \$75 and \$150. All of the money raised

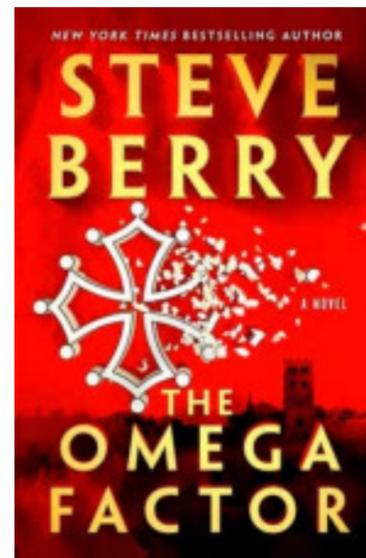
from the workshop goes to the particular historical project that we are there to support. No expenses or appearance fees are ever charged. In fact, we pay all of those ourselves. So far, we have taught nearly four thousand students. Other ways History Matters raises money is through meet and greets, speaking engagements, gala events, receptions, luncheons, dinners, club meetings, and cocktail parties. To date there have been around one hundred projects that have raised over \$2 million. We've been shut down for the past two years, but hope to get back to raising money in 2023.

Q. Cotton Malone is taking a break in 2022. Any idea when he'll be back?

Steve: He'll be back in 2023 with a new, action-packed adventure, *The Last Kingdom*, then again in 2024.

Q. What's next for Nicholas Lee?

Steve: I hope he'll return one day. But that all depends on how readers take to him. Hopefully, they will.



Steve Berry's latest: *The Omega Factor*

UNESCO investigator Nicholas Lee works for the United Nations' Cultural Liaison and Investigative Office (CLIO). Nick's job is to protect the world's cultural artifacts—from countless lesser-known objects to national treasures.

When Nick travels to Belgium for a visit with a woman from his past, he unwittingly stumbles on the trail of the twelfth panel for the Ghent Altarpiece, stolen in 1934 under cover of night and never seen since. Soon Nick is plunged into a bitter conflict, one that has been simmering for nearly two thousand years. On one side is the Maidens of Saint-Michael, les Vautours, Vultures, a secret order of nuns and the guardians of a great truth. Pitted against them is the Vatican, which has wanted for centuries to both find and possess what the nuns guard. Because of Nick the maidens have finally been exposed, their secret placed in dire jeopardy—a vulnerability that the Vatican swiftly moves to exploit utilizing an ambitious cardinal and a corrupt archbishop, both with agendas of their own.

ALIENS IN THRILLERS

BY KIM CATANZARITE

Extraterrestrials in thrillers? It just makes sense. What could be more mysterious and tension-building than creatures from outer space? Here are a few recurring themes of the extraterrestrial thriller genre.

Aliens. They're simply thrilling. Monsters with mind-boggling skills that humans have never seen before and know absolutely nothing about can lead to breath-taking drama. Extraterrestrials ooze with unpredictability whether they appear in the form of overtly chaotic overgrown insects or otherworldly eccentrics who pass for human.

As a fan of the television program *Ancient Aliens*, I truly want to believe. Throughout my life, some of my favorite stories and characters have been rooted in outer space—or immigrated from there. As a kid, I adored ET, perhaps the sweetest alien known to man, but as I've grown older, my interests tend toward a hair-raising kind of curiosity of the sort the mystery of extraterrestrials naturally provokes. Are they good or bad, wild or civil, ambitious or kind? Brilliant or monstrous, or both?

In the literary canon, aliens have been visiting planet Earth and human beings since H. G. Wells serialized *The War of the Worlds* in 1897. Since then, they have invaded our books and settled into our films, and along the way several tropes have materialized. Here are just a few of the recurring themes readers will find in the extraterrestrial thriller genre.

ALIENS ARE EVIL

This is perhaps the most thrilling (action-packed) of the thriller tropes. The extraterrestrials want to eat us or destroy us, as well as everything on Earth, with their rabid creatures and spaceship-firing laser beams like the ones in *The War of the Worlds*. In this classic, the Martians have no trouble dominating (and manhandling) our lowly human species. The situation grows more and more dire until something unsuspected changes the game. It always makes me feel better knowing that if the “evil aliens” ever do descend, something very simple could be the solution to conquering them.

Following in the footsteps of this classic, *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham features flesh-eating plants called triffids. The triffids come about after a mysterious bright green meteor shower blinds the human population. Soon after, these human-killing plants rise up and begin their attack. Published in 1951, this story has stood the test of time, inspiring many films, including *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle in 2003.

It's only human to fear the unknown, so the evil alien trope is one of the more popular, appearing in *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke, *Spin* by Robert Charles Wilson, and *The Course of the Empire* by Eric Flint and K.D. Wentworth, to name a few.

ALIENS ARE KIND

ET is not the only kind alien by far. Plenty of them want to help Earth dwellers, and that's why they've invaded our planet (or teamed up with us in outer space). In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Ford Prefect befriends Arthur Dent and proves to be charming, funny, easygoing, and most important, a loyal friend who looks out for his buddies. In Andy Weir's *Hail Mary*, protagonist Ryland Grace finds himself up against a scourge of single-celled aliens that may be doing something disastrous to our sun—as well as to other stars in the universe—and he joins forces with an unexpected ally who proves this trope is alive and well.

ALIENS LIVE AMONG US

Thanks to this motif, the idea that an eccentric neighbor is actually an alien has no doubt crossed many reader's mind. Written by Walter Stone Tevis, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* comes from an ailing planet (traveling in the equivalent of a life raft) in the hope of building a spaceship that can transport his people, the Antheans, to Earth. Due to nuclear war, their planet will soon run out of water. Going by the name Thomas Jerome Newton, the alien soon discovers he'll need money to build this spaceship. He becomes a wealthy “man” as an inventor who patents (alien) technologies. Much of the suspense comes from the need to keep his origins a secret while he carries out his mission.

A fresh take on this narrative, *Resident Alien* is a comic book written by Peter Hogan and Steven Parkhouse in 2012 and more recently a television series. Like *The Man Who Fell*, it's about an alien living on Earth, only he crash-landed here. His name is Harry Vanderspeigle, and he's biding his time while waiting for a way home. He plays at being human (a doctor, no less), which makes for many humorous moments and some pretty intense twists, too. While Harry can be heartwarming, he's also unpredictable, as aliens tend to be, which keeps readers (and watchers) on their toes. There's also an intriguing mystery involved.

ALIENS WANT TO TAKE OVER THE EARTH

They know a good planet when they see one, and they want it for themselves. *The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu features a repressed society in which protagonist Ye Wenjie, a government astrophysicist, gets into hot water when she voices concern for the environment. She ends up banished to Red Coast Base, where she must listen for signals from extraterrestrial life. One day a message arrives that tells her to stop sending signals. She doesn't heed this advice, and as a result hostile aliens hear her message and decide to make the journey to Earth. The trip will take 450 years—ample time for Earth dwellers to plan for the invasion. Instead of





banding together, though, humanity breaks into factions pitted against one another. Some want the aliens to invade as a way to unify the human race and push development further. Others want them to destroy our species altogether. In this way, this book is more about humans than the aliens who will torment them.

A YA version of this trope, *The Sound of Stars* by Alechia Dow, presents a world in which the aggressive Ilori have parked their spaceships and forcibly taken over the planet. Many humans have died and others have been drugged into obedience. Teenager Ellie Baker, whose parents have lost their will to fight, indulges her rebelliousness by keeping a secret lending library. All forms of creative expression are illegal, and the penalty for possessing any of the sort is death. When a young Ilori commander named Morris (MORr1S) discovers Ellie's lending library, he surprisingly does not bring her in. Instead, he reveals his love for music (he's not like other Ilori, who repress their feelings) and his desire for her to obtain it for him. This is the start of a bond that thickens along with the plot.

ALIENS WANT TO HELP US/ FIRST CONTACT

Many aliens are mentally and physically advanced, and some can even see into the future. Before it became a film, *Arrival* was a short story called "Story of Your Life," which appeared in a collection written by Ted Chiang. In this slow build of a deeply imaginative mystery/thriller, extraterrestrials called "heptapods" have landed all over the world in enormous spaceships. Dr. Louise Banks, a communications specialist, is brought in to "speak" with two of them. It's an intense situation as no one knows why they're here, whether or not they come in peace, and what they want from humanity. The short story leaves many

questions unanswered, but the movie takes it a step further with the more satisfying conclusion that they want to help us—and the reason why.

A best-selling novel that embodies a similar theme, Carl Sagan's *Contact* involves technologically advanced aliens who reach out via radio signals. At first, recent graduate Ellie Arroway struggles to translate the message coming from the Vega system twenty-six light years away. Soon another communication arrives with plans to build a machine. Ellie and her team will have to travel via this machine to find out why the aliens are reaching out.

THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T TELLING US EVERYTHING

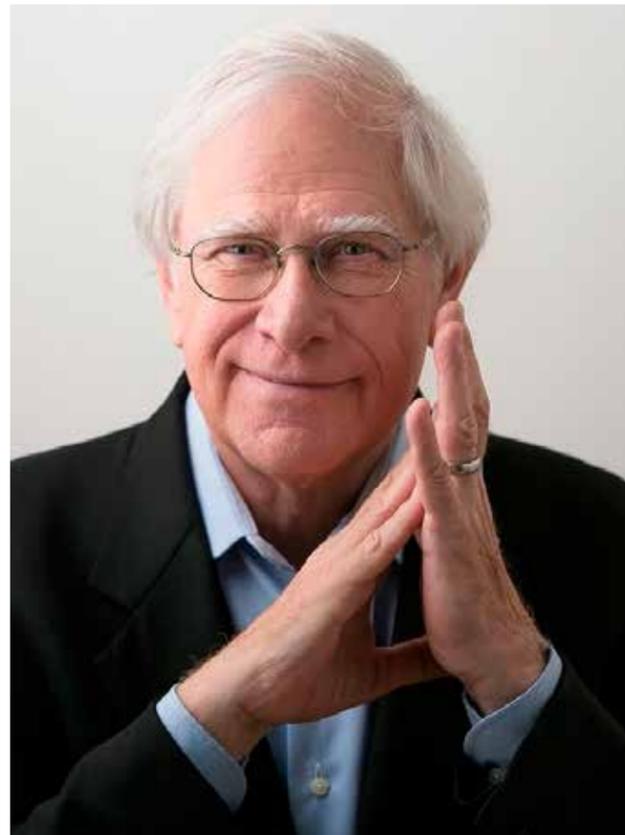
This isn't a new idea, but Douglas E. Richards's *Unidentified: A Science-Fiction Thriller* freshens it up by mixing real life with fiction. The near-future setting is based on the fact that the U.S. military recently admitted to having evidence of UFOs. They are here, flying in our airspaces and defying the laws of physics. The story follows James Ramsey, a well-known sci-fi author, who's determined to find out what we haven't been told. He becomes a serious UFO investigator who digs into official government reports of sightings. The story is steeped in facts, i.e., reports of real-life sightings that most of us have not heard about.

One thing I think we can deduct from all of these spine-tingling sci-fi tropes is that space is filled with aliens—at least as far as the human imagination goes—so it's not hard to believe that one or two, or even a whole family of them, may live on your street, or man UFOs that pass through the clouds above our heads and defy the laws of physics on a daily basis. They may want to help us, or they may want to conquer us. I guess we won't know for sure until they make themselves known.



About the author

Kim Catanzarite is an author, editor, and online instructor for Writer's Digest University. Her award-winning first novel, *They Will Be Coming for Us*, is a sci-fi thriller featuring a young woman who marries into a strange and powerful family that's obsessed with her pregnancy. The sequel in the duology, *Jovian Son*, was published in March 2022. For more details, visit AuthorKimCatanzarite.com.



John Sandford
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author
and Pulitzer Prize winner
johnsandford.org

John Sandford

John Sandford served in the U.S. Army, worked as a reporter for the Cape Girardeau *Southeast Missourian*, and received a master's degree in journalism from the University of Iowa. He was a reporter for *The Miami Herald* from 1971-78, and then for the St. Paul *Pioneer-Press* from 1978-1990; in 1980, he was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize, and he won the Pulitzer in 1986 for a series of stories about a midwestern farm crisis. From 1990 to the present he has written thriller novels.

Q. Your latest, *The Investigator*, is one our magazine called “suspenseful, unsettling, and action packed.” It’s part investigation, part action thriller. How did you come up with the story?

John: I now live in a border state, where the issues I get into with *The Investigator* are very real—the conflict between illegal immigrants at the border and so-called “militias” trying to patrol it. Sometimes the media (depending on which side they are on) will try to make these issues seem cut and dried, but they aren’t. One thing that many people have trouble understanding is that the border can’t be thought of as a line. It’s actually an area, maybe a hundred miles deep on both sides. People have been crossing that border, in both directions, for a couple of centuries, that’s always been the case. Same thing on the Canadian border. And the state of New Mexico probably couldn’t function without illegal immigrants, so there’s that. It’s complicated. The other part of the story, involving the oil fields of West Texas and New Mexico, was done simply because I find the oil culture to be fascinating.

Q. For those who aren’t familiar with the character, who is Letty Davenport? How has she grown as a character? Where did she come from?

John: Letty started out as a little girl growing up poor in a tiny town on the border of Minnesota and North Dakota. Her father abandoned Letty and her alcoholic mother, and Letty had a rough life dealing with all of that. Then her mother was murdered during an investigation run by Lucas Davenport. They bonded, and the Davenports adopted her. At that point, she stopped being poor, and grew up with a rich family, which changed everything, of course.

But a rich family with guns ...

Q. Famously, you won a Pulitzer Prize and got a measly \$50 per-week raise, which put you on the path to writing novels. If you had to do something else to make the mortgage payments, what would it have been?

John: Dunno. But I would have done something. I’ve always been interested in the complications of commercial real estate ...

Q. John Sandford is a pseudonym. How did you come by it?

John: My first “sold” thriller novel (and an earlier non-fiction book on plastic surgery) were published by Henry Holt. The thriller was the first of four “Kidd” books about a computer hacker, a character who also shows up in the *Prey* books. When I wrote the first *Prey* book, which would be published about the same time as the first Kidd book—and had been sold to Putnam’s—the Putnam’s editor asked me to use a pseudonym so the publications (and especially the publicity) wouldn’t become confused.

I first thought to use my mother’s maiden name, Barron, as my last name, but it happened that there was already a John Barron publishing novels. So, I went with my paternal great-

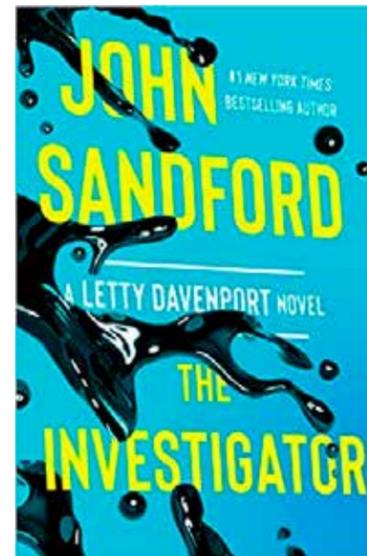
grandfather’s last name, which was Sandford. I’ve always been something of a Civil War buff, and Henry Sandford was one of the relatively few survivors of the original members of the Union Army’s Iron Brigade.

Q. Most of the criminals in your stories have the fundamental flaw of being not all that bright. Would you agree that this is a commonality?

John: I have quite a few bright killers ... but it’s true that most of the killers in my stories are either dumb or not nearly as bright as they think they are. That was my experience of covering crime as a newspaper reporter. Most of the criminals I dealt with were astonishingly stupid; some could barely function as human beings.

Q. What are you working on now?

John: A new Letty Davenport novel. I just finished, in the past couple of weeks, the next *Prey*, and took a week off before starting the new Letty. And during that week, thought of a solid possibility for a third Letty. We’ll see—we don’t even know how the first one will be received, so I may be getting ahead of myself.



John Sandford’s latest: *The Investigator*

Letty Davenport, the brilliant and tenacious adopted daughter of Lucas Davenport, takes the investigative reins in the newest thriller from #1 bestselling author John Sandford.

By age twenty-four, Letty Davenport has seen more action and uncovered more secrets than many law enforcement professionals. Now a recent Stanford grad with a master’s in economics, she’s restless and bored in a desk job for U.S. Senator Colles. Letty’s ready to quit, but her skills have impressed Colles, and he offers her a carrot: feet-on-the-ground investigative work, in conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security.

Several oil companies in Texas have reported thefts of crude, Colles tells her. He isn’t so much concerned with the oil as he is with the money: who is selling the oil, and what are they doing with the profits? Rumor has it that a fairly ugly militia group—led by a woman known only as Lorelai—might be involved. Colles wants to know if the money is going to them, and if so, what they’re planning.

Letty is partnered with a DHS investigator, John Kaiser, and they head to Texas. When the case quicky turns deadly, they know they’re on the track of something bigger. Lorelai and her group have set in motion an explosive plan ... and the clock is ticking down.

BEST LEGAL THRILLER ADAPTATIONS

From the page to the screen, here are the 10 best adaptations of legal books to film of all time.

BY J.D. TRAFFORD

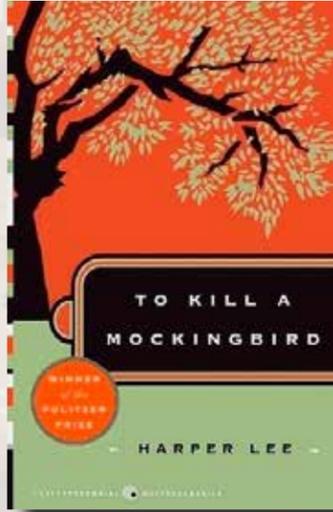
High stakes. A situation of life or death. When done well, legal thrillers have all the elements to keep readers on the edge of their seats.

Will the innocent be found guilty? Will a killer escape justice? Will our heroes stay true to their beliefs? The clock is ticking, and eventually the judge or jury must render their decision. We can be pretty sure how it's going to end, but it's never guaranteed. Sometimes the bad guys win, even when they shouldn't.

Stories about the law and justice are also rich opportunities to be more than entertainment, often holding up a mirror to reveal our own assumptions and biases. The courtroom is one of the last remaining places where people of different backgrounds, races, socioeconomic statuses, and education levels may interact in a meaningful way.

Taking a step back to look at the best adaptations of legal books to film, this clash of perspectives and backgrounds is the thread that connects each one of the stories to the other. Even though the tone, subject matter, and plots may be very different, this tension is leveraged by each author.

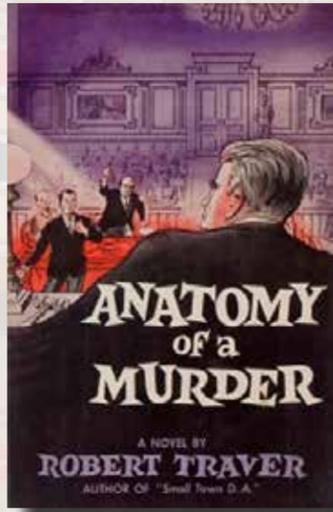
Even *The Firm*, which nobody would likely consider a deep meditation on poverty and class, exhibits this element. John Grisham sets up the story by describing in great detail the main character's broken family and working-class roots to establish his motivations when accepting the job offer at a small tax firm in Memphis over offers from big law firms in New York. The wealth and power dynamic also heightens the stakes, and makes the tenacity and grit shown at the end of the story more plausible.



To Kill A Mockingbird

Harper Lee

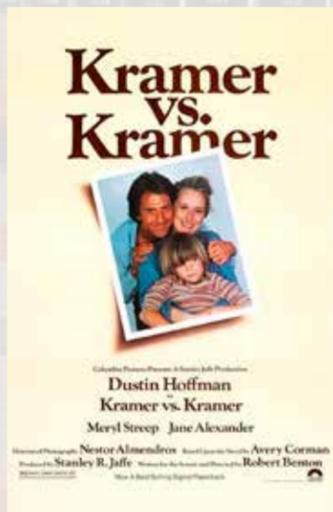
Published in 1960 and an immediate success, this book is a powerful story about a community grappling with an alleged rape and racial prejudice in the South, as seen through the eyes of a young girl. It won the Pulitzer and is one of the bestselling books of all time. Two years after publication, the film adaptation was released to similar praise. Directed by Robert Mulligan, the film was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including best picture. Gregory Peck won both the Academy Award and Golden Globe for his iconic portrayal of Atticus Finch.



Anatomy of a Murder

Robert Traver

Two years before *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there was *Anatomy of a Murder*. The book was written by Michigan Supreme Court Justice John D. Voelker under the pen name Robert Traver. The story is about a clever small-town lawyer who defends a man everybody believes is guilty of murder. The film adaptation has been recognized and preserved by the Library of Congress as culturally significant and tops multiple “best film” lists. It stars Jimmy Stewart and was directed by the legendary Otto Preminger with a musical score by Duke Ellington. Without the success of *Anatomy*, as both book and film, one wonders whether there would have been a *Mockingbird*.



Kramer vs. Kramer

Avery Corman

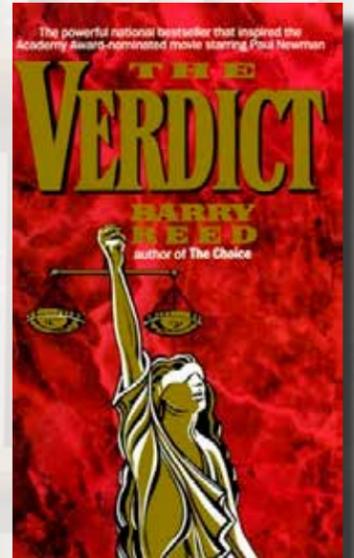
Most people know *Kramer vs. Kramer* as the 1979 blockbuster film starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. It swept the Academy Awards, winning Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actress. It is also listed in the Top 10 Courtroom Dramas by the American Film Institute. This movie, however, was actually adapted from a bestselling book by the same name written by Avery Corman and published in 1977. The book, like the movie, tells the story of a woman who left her son and husband, and then returns two years later and wants custody of the child. A bruising courtroom battle ensues with each attacking the other parent’s character and fitness. Both the book and film initiated long-overdue and still ongoing conversations about gender roles and childrearing.

The Verdict

Barry Reed

Barry Reed is not a household name, but he deserves to be more well-known. The prominent lawyer and author arguably paved the way for the modern legal thrillers later published by Scott Turow and John Grisham. Reed’s book, *The Verdict*, was released in 1980. Although it may be considered plodding by today’s standards, it was one of the first to explore the questions of justice and fairness in civil litigation. Until its release, most legal thrillers or mysteries focused on criminal cases. Reed, a prominent trial lawyer, sheds a light on the darker side of personal injury lawsuits and competing interests.

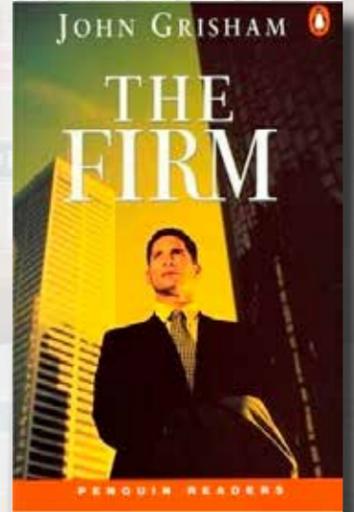
The Verdict is about an alcoholic lawyer who takes a medical malpractice case to trial, rather than agreeing on a quick settlement. He hopes to win a large verdict that will get him out of debt and save his career. The movie adaptation, starring Paul Newman as the down-and-out lawyer, featured all the best elements of the book. Directed by Sidney Lumet and written David Mamet, it was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor.



The Firm

John Grisham

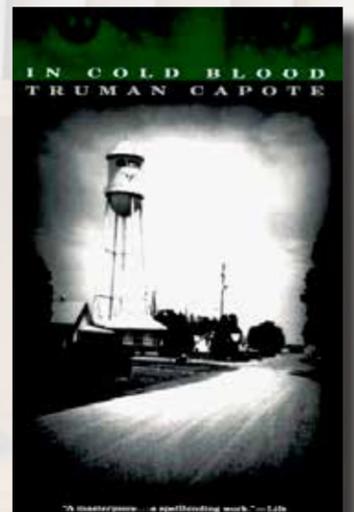
Although there were many legal thrillers and suspense novels before this one, *The Firm* defines the genre. The story of a young lawyer being sucked into a crooked law firm, and then flying to the Cayman Islands to free himself from its entanglements, is simultaneously relatable and exotic. John Grisham’s book, released in 1991, had already sold more than a million copies before the movie was released a few years later, but it’s the movie that solidifies *The Firm* as the quintessential legal thriller. When you take Tom Cruise, Gene Hackman, Hal Holbrook, and Jeanne Tripplehorn and put them in a movie directed by Sydney Pollack, you know it’s going to be a great and unforgettable experience.

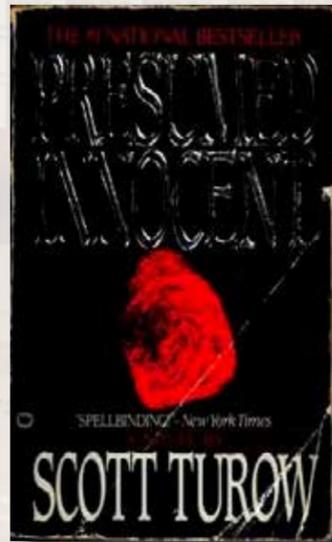


In Cold Blood

Truman Capote

Written by Truman Capote with the help of his childhood friend Harper Lee, *In Cold Blood* was an immediate bestseller. Published in 1966, it is considered one of the first “true crime” books ever written, establishing that genre. There is debate about the book’s accuracy, but it’s still a darn good story about a quadruple murder in rural Kansas as well as the trial and eventual execution of the murderers. The movie, released in 1967, directed by Richard Brooks and starring Robert Blake, was both a commercial and critical success, nominated for multiple Academy Awards.

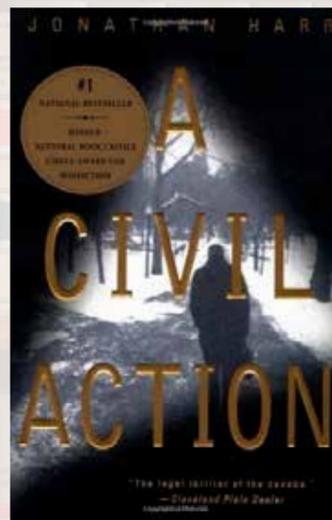




Presumed Innocent

Scott Turow

Published in 1987, *Presumed Innocent* was Scott Turow's first novel. The book still holds up thirty-five years after its release. The story is about the murder of a beautiful Assistant District Attorney in a fictional Midwestern city. Her co-worker, Rusty Sabich, is initially assigned to lead the investigation, but he soon turns into the prime suspect. The book was an immediate bestseller, and, three years after publication, the film was a box office success as well. The movie, starring Harrison Ford as Rusty Sabich, remained true to the book. It captured all the underlying intrigue surrounding ambitious prosecutors, local politics, and corruption that made the original book so special.



A Civil Action

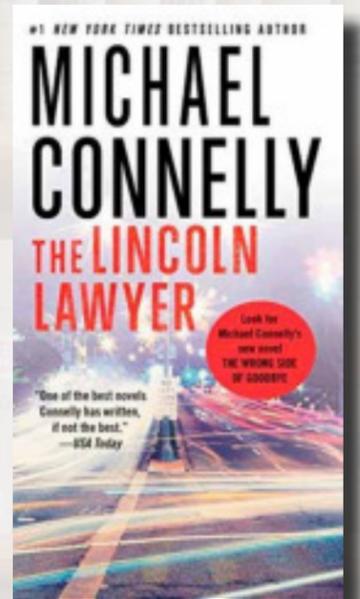
Jonathan Harr

Before *Erin Brockovich*, which was not a book-to-film adaptation, there was *A Civil Action*. This is a non-fiction book written by Jonathan Harr about a real-life plaintiff's attorney, Jan Schlichtmann, and his lawsuit against a large corporation that contaminated a town's drinking water. Schlichtmann alleges that the contamination caused a high prevalence of leukemia, and it details his quest to hold the corporation responsible. It was an effort that eventually bankrupts him. The book was a #1 *New York Times* best-seller and received significant critical praise. The film adaptation starring John Travolta as Schlichtmann was not as popular as the later-released *Erin Brockovich* movie, probably because there was no happy ending. It was, however, a phenomenal adaptation of the book and featured a cast of amazing actors. Robert Duvall's performance as the savvy defense attorney was a master class in what can be expressed through silence and subtle facial expressions.

The Lincoln Lawyer

Michael Connelly

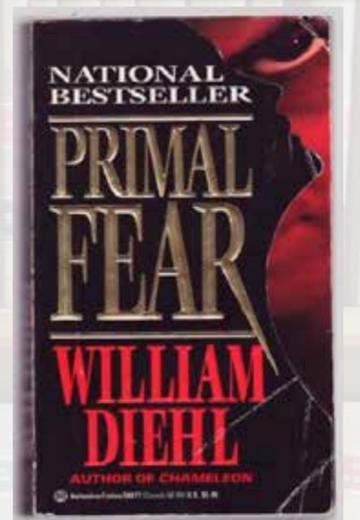
This may be a controversial pick, but just because the book and film adaptation are underrated doesn't mean it's wrong. *The Lincoln Lawyer* was written by Michael Connelly, a former reporter and prolific novelist, best known for the Harry Bosch series. It features Mickey Haller, a criminal defense attorney who works cases from the back of his Lincoln Town Car and isn't afraid to bend the rules to win a case. Through some hustle and manipulation, he lands a rich client. He's able to pay Haller a lot of money to defend him against allegations that he attacked a woman that he brought home from a bar. The film adaptation does not deviate from the book, but it's Matthew McConaughey's charisma that elevates a film that could've just easily been good to something great, all right, all right, all right.



Primal Fear

William Diehl

Although the accusations about the Catholic Church are no longer as edgy and revelatory as they were when the book was originally released in 1993, *Primal Fear* is still a crackling legal thriller. Written by William Diehl to many accolades, the story involves the murder of an influential and popular Catholic archbishop and the defense of the altar boy accused of killing him. The film adaptation retains many of the book's twists and turns, but it is the performance by Edward Norton that launches this book-to-film adaptation onto this list. Norton portrays the altar boy and he is mesmerizing.



Disqualified on a technicality

There are three courtroom films that are amazing, but are not on this list because they were never a book. *A Few Good Men*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and *Inherit the Wind* were all phenomenal adaptations of plays, not novels. Thus, Jack "You Can't Handle The Truth" Nicholson gets the shaft, although I doubt he is upset by this slight.

About the author

J.D. Trafford is a winner of the National Legal Fiction Writing Competition for Lawyers, has been profiled in *Mystery Scene Magazine* (as a "writer of merit"), and has written multiple bestselling legal thrillers. This includes *Little Boy Lost*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies worldwide and spent over three weeks as the #1 overall bestseller on Amazon. Trafford's latest legal thriller, *Merchants Bridge*, will be released in October 2022. It is the first book in the new Dark River series.

For more information, visit jdtrafford.com.





Sarah Pearse
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Sarah Pearse

Sarah Pearse lives by the sea in South Devon with her husband and two daughters. She studied English and Creative Writing at the University of Warwick and worked in brand PR for a variety of household brands. After moving to Switzerland in her twenties, she spent every spare moment exploring the mountains and the Swiss Alpine town of Crans Montana, the dramatic setting that inspired her novel.

Q. Reese Witherspoon chose *The Sanatorium* for her book club. What was your reaction when you heard? How did that support affect the trajectory of the title?

Sarah: It was the most wonderful, unexpected experience. I had so many magical moments interacting with the RBC team and Reese herself, from first hearing the news to the lead-up to publication—I will never forget the moment I first found out that it was chosen! It continues to be life-changing. Being a Reese's Book Club selection gave the book so much more exposure than it would have had otherwise, particularly as a debut, and this meant my book had a much wider platform with many more people reading the book. I have made so many connections as a result of this—from other authors (Reese's Book Club alumni and more) to readers, bloggers, and podcasters and book clubs all over the world. It has been the best possible start to my writing career and one I will always be grateful for.

Q. Suspenseful settings are at the heart of both *The Retreat* and *The Sanatorium*. What comes to mind when you think of thrilling settings?

Sarah: For me, a thrilling setting is one that can become a character in its own right, because of a combination of its past and topography or one that is geographically remote in some way—something I find intrinsically frightening in itself! I love both the physical symbolism of an isolated location and the effect it has both mentally and physically on characters in a novel. In a remote setting, the minute danger strikes there is an inherent tension (particularly if you throw a weather extreme into the mix) as it is hard for people to come help, so you can quickly push your characters to their limits.

Q. How do you conjure atmosphere with such success?

Sarah: For me, it starts with the description of the setting and knowing a place well—I think the tiny details you get when you know a location intimately are hugely important in creating atmosphere and authenticity for the reader. In particular, it helps your scenes come alive for a reader—if you know a place well and are able to describe how it appears to your every sense—from the crunch of your feet in the snow or the slap of water against your face, it really helps bring the atmosphere alive. The next step for me is then conjuring the internal environment of your characters and capturing their reaction to the setting and what is happening around them—your readers will then experience the atmosphere of a thrilling setting right alongside the characters.

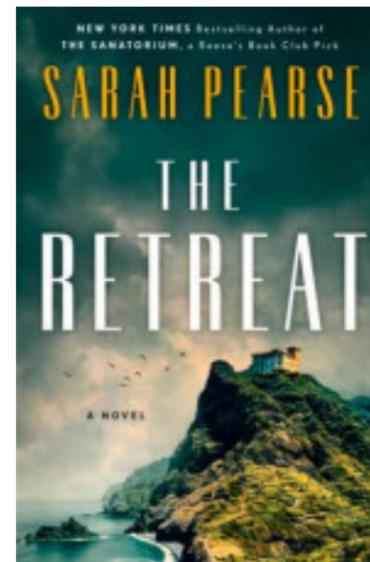
Q. On a personal note, you've said elsewhere that you're a rockpooling hobbyist. What is it, and what do you love about it?

Sarah: I'm most certainly an amateur, but I love rockpooling with my daughters in the summer—we have some won-

derful rockpools on our local beach, where we congregate together armed with buckets and nets and crab lines and try and catch little fish and crabs. We use bait (bacon or other kinds of fish or meat) and try and lure them out from under the rocks. Once we've caught them and showed off our catch, (and taken a few photographs!) we release them back into the rockpool. It's great fun and something I've done since I was small so it's lovely to now be sharing this with my daughters a generation on!

Q. What are you working on now?

Sarah: I'm working on another Elin Warner thriller. Elin is back in another dark and creepy case a little farther afield. She's reunited with her brother, Isaac, who we met in *The Sanatorium*, and we finally find out who has been watching her every move ...



Sarah Pearse's latest: *The Retreat*

An eco-wellness retreat has opened on an island off the English coast, promising rest and relaxation—but the island itself, known locally as Reaper's Rock, has a dark past. Once the playground of a serial killer, it's rumored to be cursed.

Detective Elin Warner is called to the retreat when a young woman's body is found on the rocks below the yoga pavilion in what seems to be a tragic fall. But the victim wasn't a guest—she wasn't meant to be on the island at all.

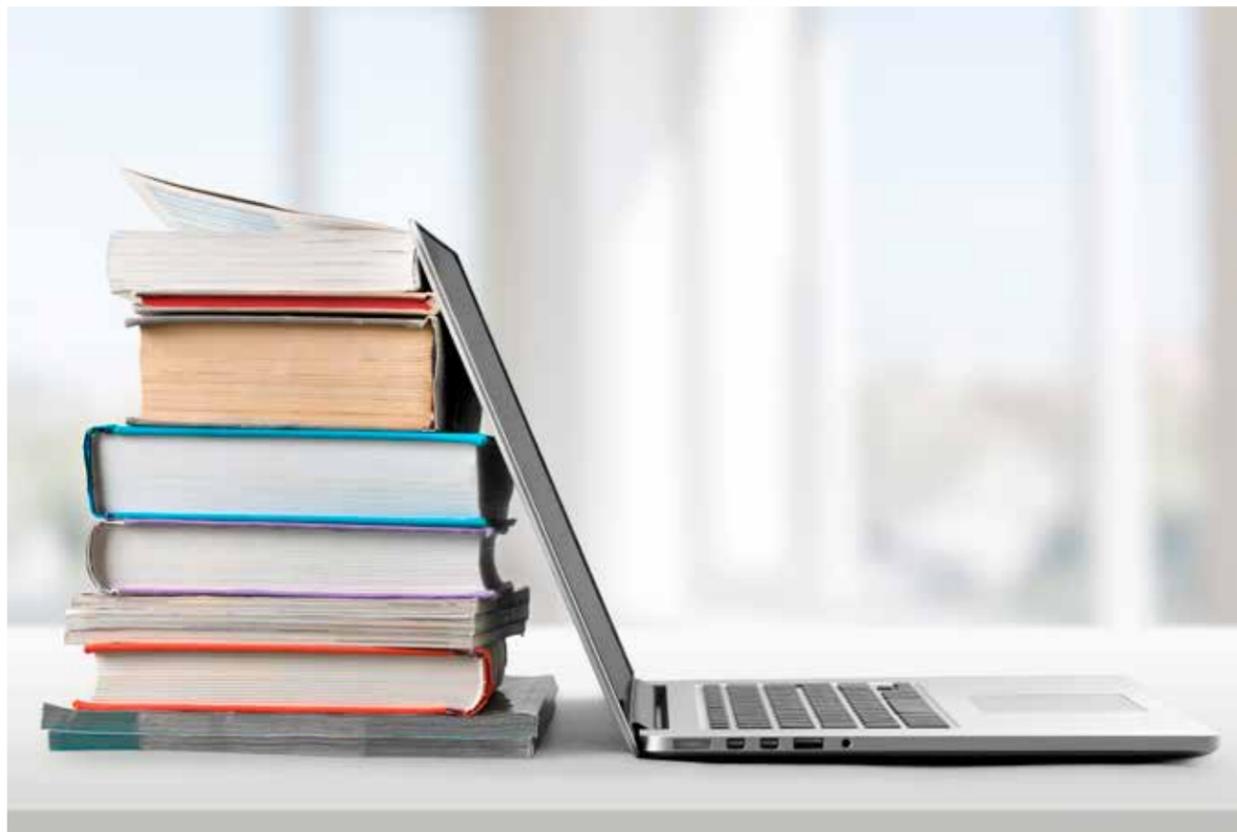
When a guest drowns in a diving incident the following day, Elin starts to suspect that there's nothing accidental about these deaths. But why would someone target the guests, and who else is in danger?

Elin must find the killer—before the island's history starts to repeat itself.

Online Book Clubs

Has your book club been shelved?
Find your new group online.

BY JC GATLIN



Meeting face-to-face to discuss the latest mystery novel with a group of like-minded bookworms has become difficult over the last couple of years. Now, online book clubs are popping up across the globe thanks to video conference platforms such as Skype and Zoom. Expanding beyond coffee shops, libraries, and living rooms to bring avid readers together, here are six online book club groups that can bring the discussions directly to your laptop.

LibraryThing.com – Crime, Thriller, and Mystery Groups
librarything.com/ngroups/tag/mystery

LibraryThing is a social networking site that offers several online groups to join, based on the mystery subgenre—Cozy, British, Agatha Christie, and more. Group discussions include online meetings and message boards. The site offers reading challenges as well as recommendations to its 2 million-plus members. And you can “friend” other members who’ve read similar books to continue conversations beyond the group.

BookTalk.org
booktalk.org/featured-books

BookTalk.org is a free online reading and discussion club with thousands of members. Recommended books include mystery and suspense titles, along with fiction, non-fiction, short stories, and poetry. Discussions are available in forums as well as live chats hosted by the website.

CrimeSpace.com
crimespace.ning.com

Crime Space is a social networking site for “readers and writers of crime fiction to meet.” They showcase new authors and provide forums to discuss the latest in crime fiction. Like any social media site, members can share photos and videos about the book being read and discussed in a group, as well as chat one-on-one with other members.

GoodReads.com – Crime, Mysteries, and Thrillers
goodreads.com/group/show/84674-crime-mysteries-thrillers

Goodreads.com is the ultimate online source for book clubs and groups. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of book discussion groups available to chat, analyze, and gush about any book you’ve enjoyed. The Crime, Mysteries, and Thrillers group offers several different titles to read each month, as well as group reads, buddy reads, games, and challenges. It’s a great way to find new titles as well as meet other avid readers who share your passion.

I Love a Mystery Book Club
cflibguides.lonestar.edu/adults/bookclub-mystery

A lot of libraries offer book clubs, and the Harris County Public Library in Cypress, Texas, offers a great mystery book club that meets online via Webex on the last Wednesday of the month. Their book selections run the gamut of cozy mysteries, classic whodunits, and thrillers. Though this book club is in Texas, participation is open to anyone who’d like to read and discuss the current mystery. Or, check your local library to see what clubs they offer.

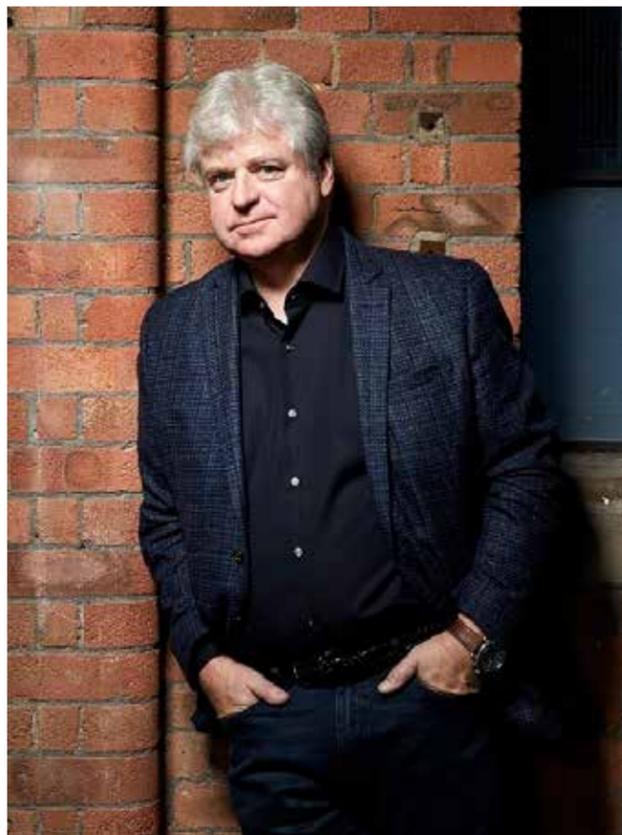
Mystery Readers International
mysteryreaders.org/reading-groups/

Mystery Readers International is a great resource to find a reader group near you. The site lists book clubs in every state, as well as a few international locations. Although most of the posts list physical meet-up locations, it’s a safe bet that a lot of them have moved their meetings to an online space. Contact information is given for each club so you can find out how and where they’re currently handling group meetings.



About the author

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



Linwood Barclay
New York Times bestselling author
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Linwood Barclay

Linwood Barclay, a *New York Times* bestselling author with twenty novels to his credit, spent three decades in newspapers before turning full time to writing thrillers. His books have been translated into more than two dozen languages and sold millions of copies, and he counts Stephen King among his fans. Many of his books have been optioned for film and TV, a series has been made in France, and he wrote the screenplay for the film based on his novel *Never Saw It Coming*.

Q. *Take Your Breath Away* is a deeply suspenseful crime mystery about a wife's disappearance, murder, and possible reappearance. What can you tell us about Andy and the horrible situation he finds himself in?

Linwood: Andy is in deep trouble on several fronts. For years, the police have suspected he killed his wife and got away with it, and they haven't given up trying to nail him. But despite that, he's been getting his life back on track. He's moved to a different neighborhood, and there's a new woman in his life. But hold on a second. If his missing wife has really returned, where has she been? And if it is her, where do his loyalties lie? With her again, after six years of absence, or this new woman that he's fallen in love with?

Q. You worked as a journalist from 1977 to 2006, as a reporter, editor, and humor columnist. What lessons do you bring over to your writing from the newspaper business?

Linwood: Working for a daily newspaper—I was at the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation newspaper, for twenty-seven years—taught me that writing is a job. Deadlines are serious business. You get your butt in the chair and you get to work. So-called “writer's block” is not an excuse when you are expected to deliver three columns a week, which I did for fourteen years. So when I go to my home office in the morning, I intend to produce.

Q. In your years as a journalist, or in your subsequent research, did you ever encounter a case with similarities to Andy and Brie's situation in *Take Your Breath Away*?

Linwood: No, never. I think, as I started writing the novel, what became apparent to me was that my main character was in the same situation Helen Hunt was in when her husband, played by Tom Hanks, disappeared and was presumed dead in the movie *Cast Away*. What an impossible situation to be in.

Q. Many of your stories have been optioned for the screen, including the French television series *L'Accident*, which ran from 2016 to 2017. What is it about your work that lends itself to visual media?

Linwood: I don't set out to write something with the idea that it might make a good movie or TV series. But I do see the story playing out in my head as if it were on a screen. And I think a good thriller has a sense of momentum to it, like a boulder rolling down a hill. It just keeps picking up speed. And characters we can identify with. I think those are the elements that might make my stories attractive to a filmmaker. I'm a kid of the '60s who was addicted to television, and I think that influenced how I write. The end of every chapter is like a commercial break. It needs some kind of hook, even a minor one, to make sure the reader stays with you.

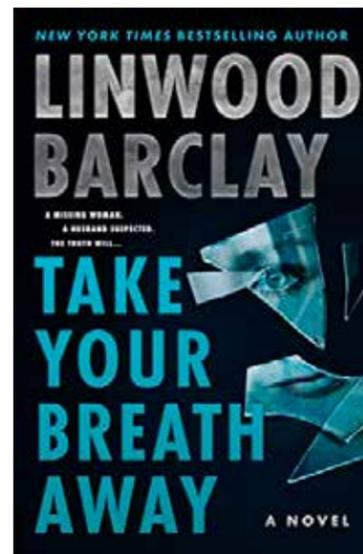
Q. Crime fiction is undergoing a renaissance, with a boom in readership, viewership, and listeners (from audiobooks to podcasts, and beyond). What is it about crime fiction that taps into the modern zeitgeist?

Linwood: There's so much about crime fiction that connects with readers. They are, for the most part, page-turners

with strong, driving plot lines. Crime fiction is also an excellent genre for tackling big issues. Turning to TV for a second, think of how a crime show like *The Wire* managed to entertain as well as focus our attention on important social issues. And in a world where chaos seems to reign lately, very often in a crime novel we have a sense of order restored, of justice served. That can be satisfying.

Q. What are you working on now?

Linwood: I recently finished the first draft of the novel that will come out in 2023. Untitled at the moment, but it's about an unsuccessful writer who finds employment writing backstories for relocated federal witnesses. As you might expect, things go horribly wrong. I'm also gearing up to promote *Take Your Breath Away's* North American release, and a second novel that will be out this year, called *Look Both Ways*. More like a Michael Crichton novel, it's a bit of a departure for me. Think of that author's *Jurassic Park*, but instead of dinosaurs, it's self-driving cars.



Linwood Barclay's latest: *Take Your Breath Away*

One weekend, while Andrew Mason was on a fishing trip, his wife, Brie, vanished without a trace. Most everyone assumed Andy had got away with murder—it's always the husband, isn't it?—but the police could never build a strong case against him. For a while, Andy hit rock bottom—he drank too much to numb the pain, was abandoned by all his friends save one, nearly lost his business, and became a pariah in the place he once called home.

Now, six years later, Andy has finally put his life back together. He sold the house he once shared with Brie and moved away. Truth to tell, he wasn't sad to hear that the old place was razed and a new house built on the site. He's settled down with a new partner, Jayne, and life is good.

But Andy's peaceful world is about to shatter. One day, a woman shows up at his old address, screaming, “Where's my house? What's happened to my house?” And then, just as suddenly as she appeared, the woman—who bears a striking resemblance to Brie—is gone. The police are notified and old questions—and dark suspicions—resurface.

Could Brie really be alive after all these years? If so, where has she been? It soon becomes clear that Andy's future, and the lives of those closest to him, depends on discovering what the hell is going on. The trick will be whether he can stay alive long enough to unearth the answers.



If You Say So

BY ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS

The guy wasn't there at lunch and then magically appeared at dinner, as if he'd just stepped out of an overlooked utility closet and into the world. Nothing surprising in and of itself. Palmer had seen it happen plenty of times. It was the nature of the place, after all. One day your neighbor of five years was moving her vegetables around as she did every evening, mumbling something about the weather or a grandchild, picking at her sleeve, and the next day she was gone, feet first, and that's if you were lucky enough to see them take her out. A lot of times the only clue was the empty chair, and you still had to ask the staff for confirmation. Which suited Palmer just fine since he didn't exactly choose the place because they were good at publicity.

But this wasn't a charity either, and empty chairs needed filling, and soon enough someone new showed up. And that was also fine by Palmer because it was another set of ears. Another receptacle for his stories—at least for the ones he chose to tell. (Just because he liked to chew the fat didn't make him stupid.) And talk about a captive audience. The only place you'd do better was a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific, and even there someone could always drop silently over the side to end it all. Here, ending it all took work, and the alternative—listening to Palmer—was mostly palatable. How he decided to look at it, anyway.

Except for tonight. Because the guy who hadn't been there at lunch and then suddenly appeared at dinner, occupying one of those rooms that was occupied one day and empty the next, was sitting at his table. In his seat. Telling a story that had the ladies leaning forward with smiles on their faces. Not the blank stares like when Palmer talked, but actual smiles. A story that had something to do with a trip to Venice, and a gondola, and confusion over reservations, and whatever the hell it was about, it had the table's full attention.

"You're in my seat," Palmer said.

The stranger stopped mid-sentence. "Sorry?"

"My seat. You're in it."

"My apologies. I was told this table had an ... opening."

Nods all around. A wet eye or two. Mrs. Talbott, ninety-one, in her sleep.

"That's still my seat."

"Pull up a chair—there's plenty of room. Chris," the stranger said, sticking out his hand. "I'm the new kid on the block, guess you could say."

Palmer didn't take his hand, which was mottled and veiny like something carved from driftwood. But because there seemed little choice he pulled up a chair, even though it wasn't his. Settled, he cleared his throat. "Can you believe that piano player in the lobby after lunch? Couldn't carry a tune, you ask me—"

"Hush Jimmy," Mrs. Ferguson said. "Chris was just telling the most marvelous story."

Chris nodded in appreciation, took a sip of water, and continued. A tall man, even sitting down, with an erect carriage. Good-looking enough, with his own teeth still. Not quite a full head of hair but still plenty of snow up top. Palmer rubbed his own billiard ball self-consciously. The guy spoke in a warm, formal voice as though he'd spent a lifetime lecturing. He gestured with his hands, but not wildly. Almost as if he were directing an invisible orchestra. Palmer fumed. Because the ladies loved it. Especially Mrs. Ferguson, beaming as if she'd follow him anywhere. And how many times had Palmer suggested in vain that she follow him into his room, and not for a go at mahjong, either?

At the end of dinner, as the wait staff cleared away the plates, Chris accepted the joint invitation of Mrs. Ferguson and Mrs. Tierney to sit in the parlor and watch the news. The nightly ritual at Sunrise House on the Genesee. As they stood, Palmer saw his opening.

“That story, about Venice? Reminds me of something that happened to me once, over at Cobb’s Hill. Just after I got back from ’Nam. Middle of winter—”

“Sorry,” Chris interrupted, looking down at him. He had at least three inches on Palmer. Chris pointed at the parlor where Mrs. Ferguson and Mrs. Tierney waited expectantly, gripping the handles of their rollators. “Maybe some other time?”

“But it’s a good story.”

“If you say so,” Chris said, retrieving his cane and slowly walking away.

Palmer wasn’t a breakfast guy. He stayed in bed until nine most days, dreaming of Mrs. Ferguson, and some others, and then took his time getting up. He could still manage most things on his own. Going to the can. Shaving. Showering—though there’d been suggestions recently he should consider help on that front. Right. Like that was going to happen. Still, a couple of the lady aides, the young ones, weren’t so bad looking. He could see an opportunity arising. Maybe he’d think about it after all. Could liven up his time in this dump.

He choked down an Ensure around 10 o’clock and watched Fox News until lunchtime. His first real meal of the day. His first chance to crow. Spinning stories for his table. “Then there was the time ...” Except today—there he was again. Chris. Still sitting in his seat. Dressed like a guy on the way to church except it was noon on a Wednesday. Cheaters around his neck, bumping up against the alert widget they were encouraged to wear in case of a fall. To hell with that, Palmer said on day one. I go down, you’ll hear me, trust me.

And there they were too, the ladies, a couple of tables’ worth, gazing at Chris like star-struck school girls while he told a new tale, head bobbing, hands gesturing, tall frame straight as a museum bust set carefully down in the chair.

“... this was in England, on my first sabbatical, and we’d decided to take the train to the Cotswolds ...”

Palmer sat with a grunt. “You see what the president’s talking about now? And don’t get me started on Congress. We oughta run the whole lot of ’em out, just start over—”

“Not now, Jimmy.” Mrs. Tierney. A resident nearly as long as him. Usually happy to hear what he had to say. Happy—or at least unable to move away. Did it matter? Another one whose bedroom he kept in his crosshairs. One of these days ...

“Thank you, my dear,” Chris said, winking. “So, there we were, late afternoon, rain coming down in absolute buckets, completely lost—no GPS in those days, obviously—when we looked over and saw ...”

Palmer tuned out, picking up the menu. Most of the time he had an appetite at lunch, but not today. No secret why. This loudmouth Poindexter had spoiled it. Taking over *his* table. Supplanting *his* stories. Captivating *his* ladies. Not even a day into his arrival and something was going to have to give, Palmer thought grimly.

“You some kind of professor?” Palmer said when Chris finally shut his trap and took a breath. Down to coffee and dessert—he’d rambled on nearly the entire lunch. Just the two of them now—the ladies excusing themselves to catch a shuttle to the hairdresser.

“Retired. From the U of R.”

“The what?”

“The University of Rochester?” The slightest hint of disdain as he spoke.

“Sure,” Palmer grunted. “Used to pick people up there all the time.” He waited for a query about this comment but it never came. Instead, Chris cut his cherry cobbler into neat squares and spooned one into his mouth as if Palmer weren’t even present.

“I drove a limousine,” he said finally, angry that he had to volunteer the information. “Some of the stories I could tell—”

“Apologies, old chap,” Chris said, his face blank as the napkin on his lap. “But I don’t have time just now.”

And with that, Chris spooned up a second bite of cobbler, stood, reached for his cane, and walked out of the dining room without even a glance behind.

And so it went. Chris regaling the ladies at every meal, even breakfast—Palmer dragged himself out of bed one morning to confirm his suspicions. Chris McCorkle, according to the lady who ran the reception desk. Another one who listened to Palmer’s stories, even if she pecked at her computer or opened mail or held up a finger to take a call as he talked. *McCorkle*. What the hell kind of name was that? Yet somehow it fit. A dweeby name for a dweeby guy. *Chris McCorkle*. A dork Palmer wouldn’t have wasted a second glance on once upon a time. But now? Now he was sucking up all the oxygen that used to belong to him.

“I got some stories, tell you what.”

Four days in. In the back corner of the library. Normally, Palmer never set foot in the place—you read one book, you read them all, was his opinion—but he’d been on the lookout. On the prowl. And sure enough, there he was, late one afternoon, McCorkle, sitting in a chair at a table, intent on his book. Lips moving while he read, Palmer observed with a smirk.

McCorkle looked up. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said, I got some stories. Stuff you wouldn’t believe.”

“That’s nice,” McCorkle said, returning to his book.

“I’m not talking tea parties in England. Stories that’ll make your hair stand on end.”

“Mmm.”

“Like this one time? I was on the Inner Loop, way past midnight, driving a ’76 Caddy Fleetwood, brand fucking new. Kodak veep in the back seat and not with his wife, you catch my drift, when all of a sudden—”

“Do you mind?”

“What?”

“I said do you mind? I’m rather in the middle of something.” He tapped the open pages of his book.

“Rather in the middle?” Palmer said, mimicking the phrase.

“That’s right.”

“You’re not interested in my story?”

“Not right now, thanks.”

“Everybody else likes my stories.” Delivered with a growl. The tone that usually made people sit up and pay attention.

“I’m sure they do,” Chris said, lowering his head and returning to his reading.

Palmer seethed. Being rejected was bad enough. He’d spent a lifetime telling stories, and people always listened. Always—or else. But for a guy like *this* not to listen? A pointy head whose idea of a laugh was something involving biscuits on a train passing through France, or whatever he’d been talking about at lunch? To imply—no, to state more or less outright—that he wasn’t interested in Palmer’s stories? It was rude, and more than that, it was intolerable. And Palmer didn’t do intolerable. He might have sidled into Sunrise House to die, eventually, but not to be disrespected.

He made up his mind a day later. Time for a little chat. The kind he’d been good at—really good at—back in the day. He stood at McCorkle’s door an hour before dinner and knocked, and when no one answered he turned the knob and stepped inside. He called out but no one answered. He stepped farther in, made sure McCorkle was really gone, and took a closer look. Exactly the kind of place you’d expect. Books and magazines and newspapers everywhere. TV on but turned to WXXI, the public TV station. On the screen some kind of show involving English accents and horses and old-timey costumes. Figured. Palmer shook his head and walked out in disgust. Careful to pull the door shut behind him. He turned to head to his own room when he saw him, at the end of the hall. McCorkle. Walking into Mrs. Ferguson’s room. And shutting the door behind him.

Palmer bided his time. Let a couple more days pass. Unpleasant days. Very unpleasant, if he were being honest about it. He couldn’t get a word in edgewise at

meals anymore. Chris either talking nonstop, story after story, or leading a conversation—letting the ladies take a turn, too. Clapping his hands in pleasure at their own reports.

“That reminds me,” Palmer said, seizing an opening at lunch. “This one time—”

“Maybe later?” Chris said, waving him off before launching into something about a mouse in a lecture hall that drew a gale of giggles.

Palmer waited until McCorkle reached for his cane at the end of lunch and was standing uncertainly. A bit of spaghetti sauce still on his cheek. Palmer didn’t bother to tell him about it. Instead, he leaned in and whispered, “I’ve got blood on my hands.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. And I’m not just talking the war.”

“OK.” McCorkle swayed suddenly and instinctively brushed the widget around his neck. Palmer waited, kinda hoping the guy would fall. Serve him right. When he didn’t, somewhat disappointed, he continued.

“Now that’s a story,” Palmer said.

“What is?”

“What I’m trying to tell you.” He lowered his voice even further. “Stuff I’ve been through.”

Palmer caught the expectant look on McCorkle’s face and thought this was it. The breakthrough. The moment he finally had the guy’s attention.

Instead, McCorkle reached for a napkin, cleaned the sauce from his cheek, said, “If you say so,” and headed for the dining room doors.

Palmer caught up with him, furious. “Did you hear what I said? Blood *on my hands*. You need to listen up, for your own good.”

McCorkle looked at him blankly, as if meeting a man in the street whose name he should really know but just couldn’t recall.

“That’s nice, I’m sure,” he said. “But I’m really not interested.”

Palmer felt like he was losing it. What was it with this guy? Thinking he could just march in and take over, and worse, ignore what Palmer had to say? No one else ignored him. Yeah, maybe he’d catch Mrs. Tierney drifting now and then as he rattled on about the time he drove these three thick necks all the way to Atlantic City starting at midnight, and them having to be back by midnight the next day, but he could always bring her around with a smack on the table and a gruff, “Hey, you hearing what I’m saying?” But these days Mrs. Tierney wasn’t drifting off—she was hanging on McCorkle’s every word. How soon until he was in her room, Palmer wondered.

Palmer ran him down the next day. Followed him into the chapel. That time of day, right after lunch, McCorkle was usually there alone. Palmer knew. He'd studied up. A patch of colored light floating on the floor by McCorkle's shoes from where the sun came through a stained-glass window.

"What would you say if I told you I killed someone?"

McCorkle looked up and unclasped his hands.

"Killed someone?"

"What I said."

McCorkle smiled. "I'd say you have a vivid imagination."

"Imagination? Listen, you smarmy prick. I'm not kidding around here. I'm talking about real life, not something you read in a book."

"I'm sure you are."

"So, you going to open those big ears and listen, or what?"

"I'm really sorry," Chris said. "But I just don't care to be bothered."

Palmer leaned in close. Eyed the alert widget cord around McCorkle's neck. Thought how easy it would be to grab it and twist, and twist, until those watery blue eyes bulged like shiny marbles pinched between a thumb and forefinger. With pleasure, he saw McCorkle swallow.

"Ready to listen now?"

"No," McCorkle said.

"You kidding me?"

"I said no."

"You really don't know what you're missing."

"If you say so," McCorkle said, reclasping his hands as another resident, balanced on her walker, entered the room.

Time flowed differently here. Outside, in Palmer's old world, you'd wait for night and the cover of darkness. The quiet. The world shutting down. Here, night could be busy. Aides running in and out of rooms with medicine. With directives for undressing residents for bed. With instructions for helping them work the remote for their evening shows. After breakfast, though, that was another matter. A pause after the morning rush. Many residents back in their rooms dozing. The aides clustered around the hall station, taking their break after the early morning cleaning and feeding and pill-dispensing.

Palmer didn't knock. He just turned the knob and walked right in. McCorkle was sitting back in his recliner, eyes shut. But they snapped open as he sensed someone standing over him.

"These guys," Palmer said, slapping the article down on Palmer's food tray so hard the remnants of McCorkle's morning coffee jumped out of the cup.

"What are you doing in here?"

"This was me."

"What?" Confusion clouding McCorkle's eyes.

"Read it."

"I don't want to."

"Read it."

McCorkle looked down at the article, reluctance etched on his prissy face. Palmer grinned as he watched his lips move across the headline.

Police suspect foul play in brothers' disappearance

McCorkle looked up after a moment.

"So?"

"Keep reading."

He watched McCorkle's eyes trail down the paragraphs on the yellowed paper. He didn't read along. No need. He had it memorized. When McCorkle was finished he looked up at Palmer again.

"I don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

"Why you're showing me this."

"I'm showing you this because that was me. I did those guys. Blood on my hands. Remember?"

McCorkle lost a little color in his face. His hand rose unconsciously to his widget. Like that would help him now. "You're saying ..."

"I'm saying I did those two. I told you I've got stories."

Palmer could not fathom the next words he heard out of McCorkle's pie hole.

"I don't believe you. And I really wish you would leave."

"Don't believe me?" Palmer pulled the knife from his pocket. Purloined from dinner two days earlier. Salisbury steak night. The knives overdoing it a bit, but Sunrise liked the residents to feel special, even if the steak was soft as an old sponge, and about as tasty. Palmer lifted the knife and placed the tip just below McCorkle's chin.

"I'm telling the truth," Palmer said.

"If you say so," McCorkle said, eyes widening in fear.

Palmer touched the knife to McCorkle's throat, puckering the skin inward like flesh on a chicken you're about to deep fry.

"I say so."

"Please—"

"I killed those guys. Say it."

"No."

"Say it!"

McCorkle's eyes began to water. "OK, OK. You killed them. Now please would you—"

"You're damn right I killed them."

McCorkle's eyes dropped to the article. Hands fluttering like leaves on a fall day as temperatures plummet and the wind picks up. "Those two?"



"What I said."

"Bunny?"

"What?"

"The one was named Bunny?"

"Benny," Palmer said, nearly shouting. "Not Bunny. Benny. Benny Mantegna and his dumbshit brother Nicky."

"You killed them both? Benny and, and ..."

"Are you deaf? That's what I just said. I killed Benny and Nicky Mantegna." Palmer jabbed the paper with his forefinger. "Those guys right there."

"But why?"

Palmer was losing patience with all these questions. He pushed the knife a little harder against McCorkle's throat. Disgusted, he realized a second later that the terrified man had pissed all over himself.

"Because a guy asked me to."

"But—"

"But what?"

"The article just says they're missing. Not dead. So maybe you didn't kill them. Not really."

Palmer leaned so close their foreheads nearly touched.

"Listen, asshole. The reason I know I killed them is because they're at the bottom of the well in Batavia where I put them. Where I'm going to put you if you don't shut up and give me my seat back and start listening to my stories and stop fucking my ladies."

"I didn't—"

"I saw you going into Ferguson's room. Don't deny it."

"It wasn't like that. *Downton Abbey* was on. She needed help with her TV—"

"Do you take me for a complete idiot?"

McCorkle shook his head.

"And you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes." So softly Palmer almost didn't hear.

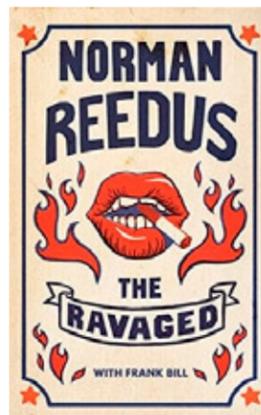
"What?"

"Yes," McCorkle gasped, as tears streamed down his cheeks.

So that did the trick, finally.

Palmer had his old chair back at lunch. He sat in it and told a long story about the time he drove Sinatra, Ol' Blue Eyes himself, to Buffalo one night when it was so snowy they shut the thruway down and he had to go Route 20

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SUMMER



The Ravaged
Frank Bill & Norman Reedus

Rarely can a debut novel move readers so completely and leave them speechless at the end. *The Ravaged* is a gritty, honest novel by Norman Reedus and Frank Bill. The writing is absolutely brilliant and unputdownable after the first page.

The story follows three individuals who are trying to escape their lives for different reasons. Jack has spent all of his life

working and providing for his family, but at sixty-five, he is alone. He has escaped to Chile on his late mother's advice to run and not come back, and he now walks solo with no money and no identification, carrying the heaviness of regret and grief wherever he goes. Hunter, a motorcycle repairman, has left his job at a local garage because of his abusive boss, and has taken Ruby, his boss's dog, with him. His father has passed away in a mysterious fire, and he and his two best

friends take a motorcycle pilgrimage across the country from North Carolina to California. Anne, a teenager, is escaping an abusive home and the possibility that she may have murdered her brother after hitting him with a frying pan. She and her best friend, Trot, learn the fine art of train hopping.

Reedus writes a harsh and gritty account of three very different people. The stories come together interestingly, but what really sticks is how each protagonist learns how family can mean something different for everyone. Anne comes from a poor family with alcoholic and abusive parents, but finds a new family in a group of homeless teenagers and children she meets along the way. Hunter, a loner, meets new family on his journey that he didn't even know about. Jack sees all kinds of families in Chile and then Colombia, doubling his regret at missing most of his children's formative years. There is hope in each journey. Reedus and Bill have written a sometimes harsh, and sometimes heartwarming novel that will stick with readers for a long time.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



The Golden Couple
Greer Hendricks & Sarah Pekkanen

The "golden couple" is only a superficial illusion, clouded by secrets and deceit. Marissa and Mathew Bishop appear to have it all: a seemingly perfect life in the suburbs with highly successful financial standing and a much-loved son. Both husband and wife are very attractive.

It all comes crashing down with a single act of infidelity.

To save her marriage and "perfect" family, Marissa convinces Matthew to seek therapy with the unconventional, but renowned, Avery Chambers. Avery would not take on clients unless she felt she could help with her unique ten-session therapy.

Avery has an extremely hands-on approach. She frequently inserts herself into her clients' lives outside of the office to investigate material uncovered during sessions, so she can judge their authenticity and motivation. Her field

work rivals the best female amateur detectives—move over Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher. Lies and deceit come tumbling down. The characters are deliciously laid out in a multi-layered web, confounded by secrets that gradually unfold among a plethora of red herrings. No one is who we originally thought.

Hendricks and Pekkanen seamlessly craft a complex and twisted narrative that delves into the minds and actions of all involved, while slowly ratcheting up tension and intrigue and culminating in an explosive denouement. The reader is immersed in an intricate, tense, and addictive psychological thriller. Avery Chamber's first-person narrative is expertly alternated with those of Marissa, encouraging the "hooked" reader into rapid page-turning to uncover the true motivations and secrets. There is a sinister element that binds the secrets and deceit together. Who really is trustworthy? Jump on board this emotional roller coaster ride and explore the human psyche and diversity of relationships.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



The Devil Himself
Peter Farris

Eighteen-year-old Maya finds herself gagged and bound in the trunk of a vehicle, slated for murder. Maya is a sex trafficking victim and has outlived her usefulness because one of her politically powerful abusers (coined "The Mayor") has told her too much about Lucio Cottles and his criminal enterprise.

Cottles, a deadly and sociopathic street-wise savant, has created his own depraved world, ruling with amoral behavior and learning information truly is power, and in more ways than one. Cottles is part of a larger criminal consortium secretly developing the woods of Southern Georgia for future criminal endeavors.

When Maya is able to escape and flee her pursuing captors into the deep Georgia woods, they encounter Leonard Moyer on his wooded property. Moyer, long from the culture of hills, takes great offense of outsiders seeking to do harm to others upon his property. After dealing with Cottle's men, he allows

refuge for Maya. Maya and Leonard develop a mentor/student relationship, with Leonard vowing to protect Maya.

Maya also makes it clear to Leonard that the man who wants her dead will certainly not be dissuaded from sending even more dangerous men to clean up the mess created by the failure of the previous two.

Throughout the region, Leonard is both feared and respected, with many questioning his sanity due to his frequent public appearances with a female mannequin he identifies as his believed-deceased wife, Marjean.

While the main theme of *The Devil Himself* of an outsider entering an unknown world while being protected by a mysterious benefactor may seem familiar or even a crime/thriller trope, Farris still is able to craft an interesting tale with interesting characters and plotting. Farris also tosses in new elements to a story where strangers from different worlds are thrown together in a time of turmoil.

The Devil Himself is highly recommended to readers who enjoy "rural noir" novels and novels from such authors as David Joy, Brian Panowich, and Kimi Cunningham Grant.

Reviewed by Eric Ellis

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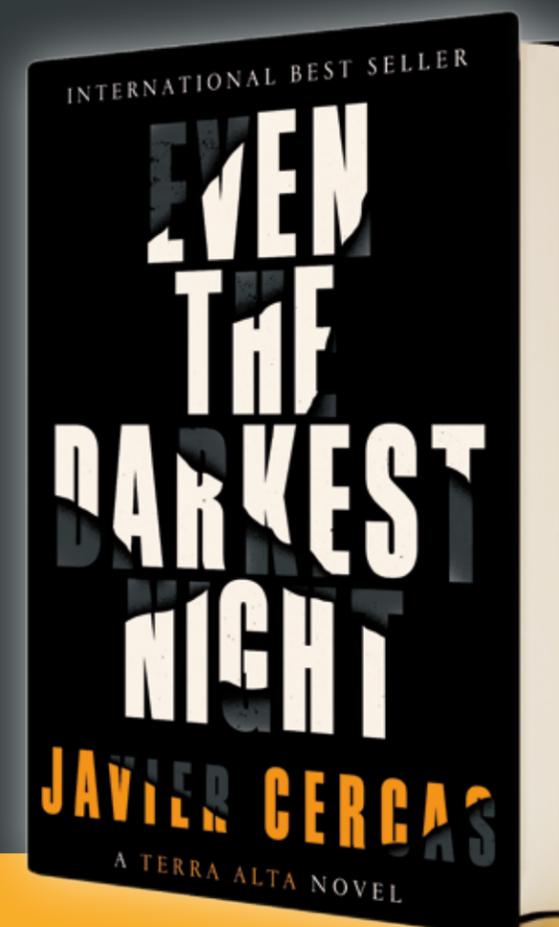
—Domingo Ródenas de Moya, *El Periódico SP*

"MASTERFUL."

—TTL, *La Stampa IT*

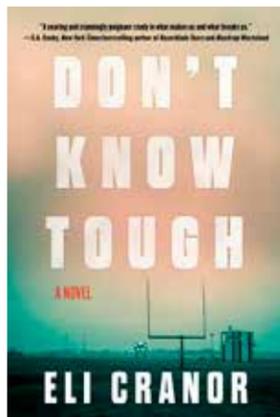
"EXQUISITE."

—Olivier Mony, *Sudouest FR*



Available 6.21.22





Don't Know Tough

Eli Cranor

Don't Know Tough is intense. It's like a dark *Friday Night Lights* with a gruesome murder mystery thrown in. It's full of the twists you see only in the most seasoned writers.

Yet, this is Eli Cranor's first novel. He writes about the complex, but also magical, world of football in small-town Arkansas. But don't be fooled. This book is dark. There is racism,

murder, teen pregnancy, bullying, and horrific abuse. The characters are multi-faceted, but tragic.

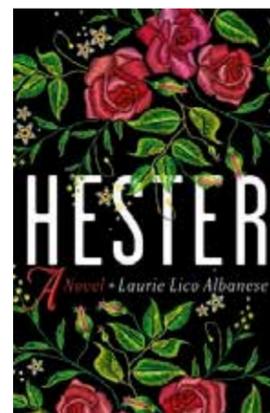
Billy Lowe is one tough football player. Simple-minded and angry, he cannot control his temper. He has been raised by a single mom, Tina, never really knowing his dad. His mother's longtime boyfriend is abusive. Cranor brings readers right into Lowe's reality in only a few sentences. Billy's story will grab you and not let go.

In the same vein as the movie *The Blind Side*, Billy's life is so unstable that the new coach takes him in. Trent Powers has moved his family from California to coach the Denton Pirates. He was fired from his previous coaching job under his father-in-law's guidance. Marley, his wife, is disappointed in Trent and unhappy in Arkansas. But he is determined to show Marley and his father-in-law that he can make it to the play-offs. He knows he cannot do this without Billy Lowe.

When Billy beats up rich kid Austin Murphy at practice, the principal recommends that they pull Billy out, putting Trent in a bind. Trent thinks he has the answer to both his and Billy's problems by taking Billy into his home. But when Trent and the chief of police find a body, everything explodes.

While Billy runs from his family, Trent runs from a wife who can't be happy with him unless he is doing what her father says. Cranor writes with expertise, having played football at every level, including coach. Readers will feel they are sitting in the stands not having any idea how the game will end. This author is one to watch!

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



Hester

Laurie Lico Albanese

Scotland, 17th century: Isobel Gowdie is four years old when her mother teaches her how to make letters with a needle. The letters are supposed to be black, but Isobel sees colors associated, and stitches them according to her vision.

When her mother smacks her knuckles, Isobel sees fear in her eyes; fear because her mother doesn't want people to call Isobel crazy. A witch. And here, witches are hanged or burned.

One-hundred-forty years later, Isobel Gamble, descendent of Isobel Gowdie, is conscripted to a tambour shop by her mother. It's a place without colors. But Isobel dreams of being a patternmaker. She is taught to fear anything that hints at witchcraft. When she meets a man who promises her a sewing room of her own, she accepts his proposal. But that is just a promise. His poor decisions lead to the poorhouse, and later see them bound for America.

As they arrive in the New World, Isobel quickly recognizes some opportunities, awakening her dream of embroidery again. But with each day in Salem, she's daunted by Salem's established thinking and expectations.

Yet her path crosses with that of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and they feel an attraction from the first encounter.

Isobel is a captivating character. She lives in a time when she is supposed to depend on a man, but she sees the New World as her opportunity. She learns to be shrewd. Boldness comes easily to her, but she needs to watch her temper.

This mesmerizing tale is shrouded in mystery, with a central theme of guarding one's extraordinary ability, at the time seen as witchcraft. The story explores the spellbinding subject of synesthesia, a unique sensory phenomenon of colors associated with letters. Nathaniel is haunted by his ancestor's past, a magistrate in the Salem witch trials of 1692. It's a fascinating thread woven into this story. Nathaniel craves solitude to commit himself to becoming a writer after his college years, but evidence also shows that he was more of a rulebreaker during his college years. Did the transition happen so suddenly, or there was more to it?

Reviewed by Annette Bukowiec

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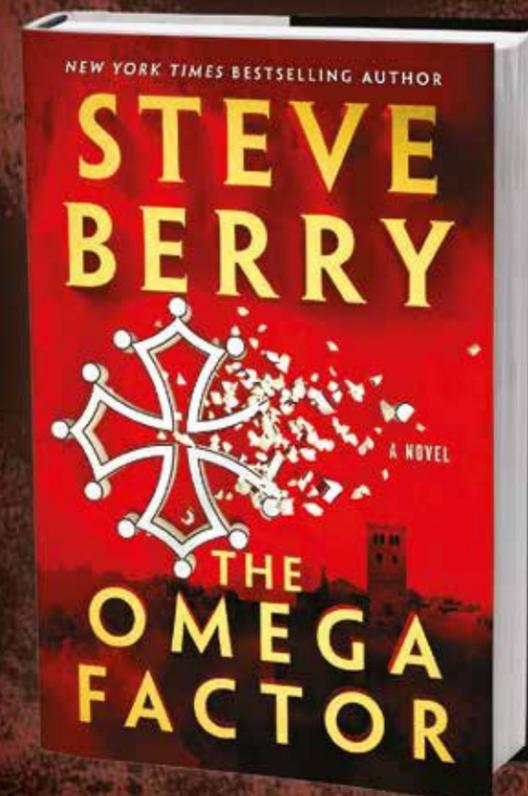
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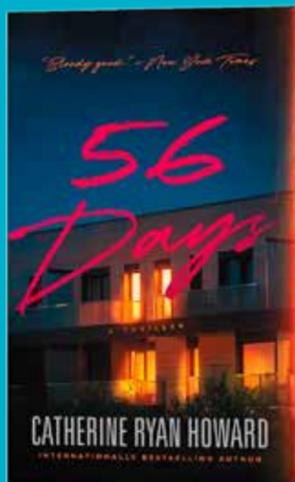
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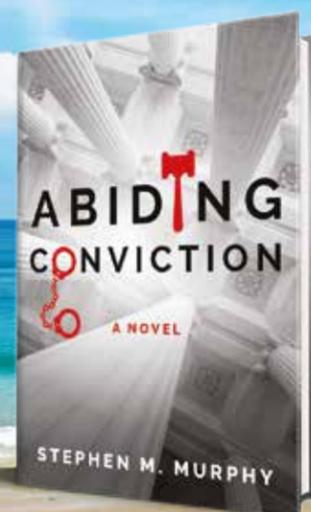


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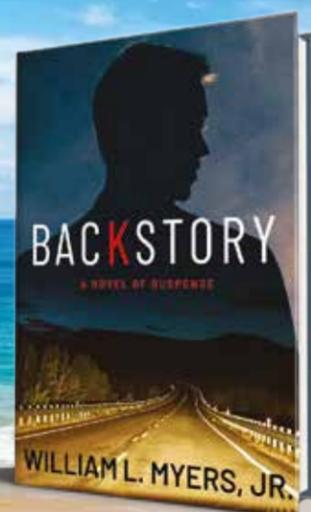
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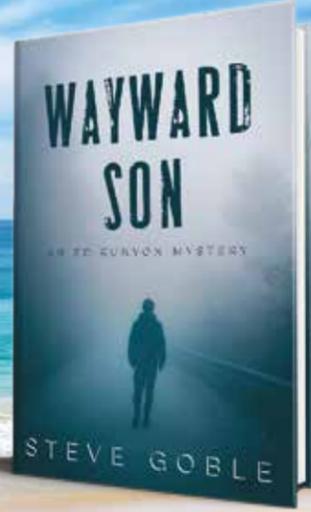
SUMMER READS



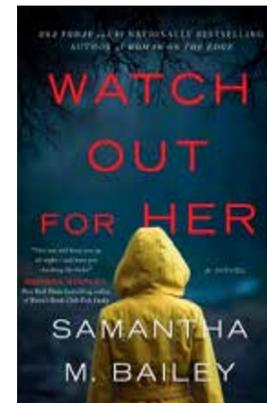
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Watch Out for Her
Samantha M. Bailey

Watch out for her. An omi-
nous warning? Or an expression
of concern? With an abundance
of lies and secrets, envy and mis-
trust, this thriller leaves readers
scrambling to figure out who to
believe, who to trust, and who to
watch out for. The story unfolds
through the voices of two highly
suspicious narrators in a past/
present timeline.

Then: Sarah and Daniel Goldman hire twenty-two-year-
old Holly Monroe as a nanny to their six-year-old son, Jacob.
Little do they know this will turn out to be a fatal mistake.
On the surface, the Goldmans appear to be a normal, upper-
middle-class family living the dream. Holly envies the Gold-
mans' easy atmosphere and sets about manipulating her way
into the family as a trusted member. Everything is beautiful—
until it isn't. After witnessing a shocking event, Sarah asks her
husband to move their family to escape the babysitter.

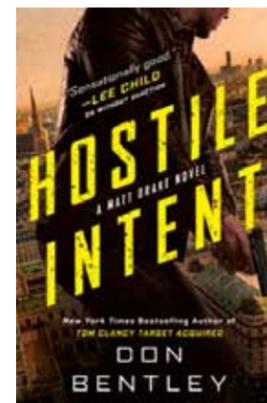
Now: The new beginning the Goldmans so desperately
hoped for eludes them. Sarah finds hidden cameras in their
new house the first day, a prowler is seen in the yard that

night, and their new neighbors are a bit strange. Cryptic text
messages, moved security cameras, and not-so-subtle in-
nuendos have Sarah in a panic and Daniel questioning her
sanity. The story that ensues is a roller coaster of emotional
turmoil, obsession, and disbelief. Is Holly seeking revenge for
being left behind? Or is Sarah delusional?

Watch Out For Her is a tense, character-driven thriller. The
steady pace gains momentum as the secrets begin spilling
over, leaving this dysfunctional family desperate for answers
even as each member continues guarding their own secrets.
Readers have the huge advantage of being in both Holly and
Sarah's heads as they take turns narrating the story from their
own unique viewpoints. Unfortunately, neither of these two
characters knows what the other is thinking.

Watch Out For Her is an anxiety-riddled ride with a me-
nacing undertone that keeps readers guessing. Bailey has
peeled back the layers of a broken family, revealing the depth
of devastation brought about by distrust, too many secrets,
and obsession. Fans of mystery and suspense will enjoy this
book, especially if they love character-driven thrillers.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



Hostile Intent
Don Bentley

Don Bentley infuses the third
book in his Matt Drake thriller
series with action, travel, sus-
pense, and an intensity like few
others can achieve. This book,
which can be categorized as an
espionage thriller, a political
thriller, and a military thriller
as it has aspects of all three, is
set largely in Ukraine and Aus-
tria, but there are key scenes in

Washington D.C. and Russia as well.

Matthew Drake and his wife Laila are at a shooting range
when his boss calls. Matt is a Defense Intelligence Agency
(DIA) case officer who runs and recruits assets all over the
world. A walk-in to the U.S. embassy in Vienna claims he has
critical information about a Russian intelligence operation.
He asks for Matt by name, not by one of his aliases. Before
he can debrief Nolan Burke, a Russian team kidnaps Nolan.

Matt is full of wit and sarcasm, but he has a serious side.
He wants to make the world safer and often sacrifices his own
well-being to achieve this. He shows character growth despite

the large amount of action in this novel. The other characters
have a variety of depths in their supporting or opposing roles.
Some are new to the series and others provide the reader con-
tinuity with the prior books in the series.

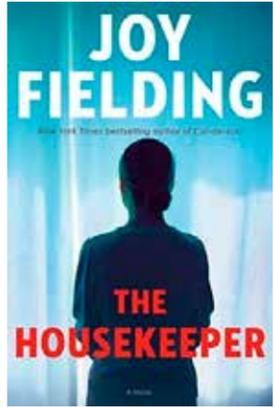
Fluid writing and fantastic world building, as well as an
excellent, fast-paced plot will keep readers engaged. The first
three chapters pique your interest while chapter four grabs
readers and immerses them in the story. At this point, the ac-
tion and drama are so compelling the pages nearly turn them-
selves. While there are descriptions of weapons and gear, it is
only enough to engage the reader—an approach that makes
this novel appeal to a wider audience.

Overall, this novel is a shockingly dark, disturbing, sus-
penseful, and emotional ride. Be aware that there is plenty of
danger, intrigue, and violence. Additionally, with the current
situation in Ukraine, this one seemed all too realistic. Themes
include bureaucratic wars, teamwork, spies, political maneu-
vering, corruption, graft, differences in operational philoso-
phies, friendship, loss of face, the impact of social media, and
much more.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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The Housekeeper

Joy Fielding

Jodi Bishop's marriage is suffering. She is the breadwinner while her husband tries to follow up the success of his first novel. Between her demanding job as a real estate agent, her two young children, and her aging parents, with her mother dying from Parkinson's disease, she has little time for her marriage. Forced into a corner, Jodi

interviews a live-in housekeeper for her parents so she can spend more time with her family. When she meets Elyse, the perfect candidate, Jodi can't believe her luck. Elyse is everything she is looking for, almost too good to be true, and you know what they say about that.

At first, everything was perfect. Vic, her difficult and controlling father, seems to approve of Elyse. She takes care of the house and Jodi's mother, cooks, bakes, and even offers to watch the children while Jodi has appointments. As time goes on, Jodi sees red flags. Is that her mom's Cartier watch Elyse is wearing? Does that green silk blouse hanging in Elyse's closet belong to her mother? When Elyse is confron-

ted, she has perfectly reasonable explanations, but when Jodi stops by and finds her mother in a heap at the top of the stairs, she questions what else is going on.

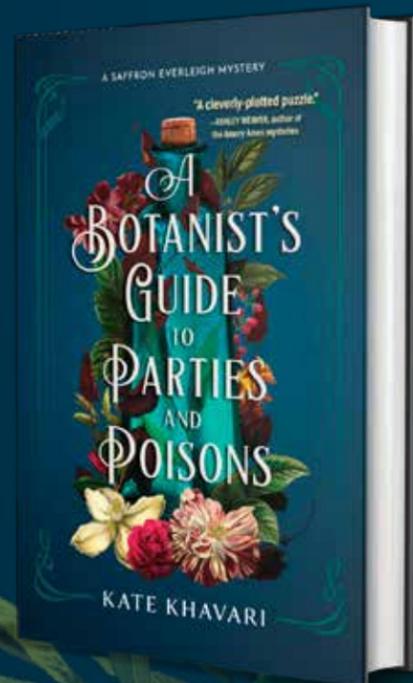
Meanwhile, despite the help, Jodi's marriage is falling apart. Her gaslighting husband, Harrison, is struggling to finish his second novel and becoming too close to one student he teaches.

The Housekeeper is told from Jodi's point of view, which becomes very frustrating as Jodi is a "doormat"—from Harrison, who excels at gaslighting, to her father, who calls her fat every chance he gets and puts her down any way he can, to her older sister, Tracy, who throws her under the bus all the time. It was hard to figure out why Jodi cared so much about making sure her father was OK, when he clearly didn't like her at all. She is everyone's punching bag.

This book is such a wild ride. All the characters, except for the two children, are terrible people, but that is what made the book hard to put down. You never knew what anyone was going to do next. It is so addictive that readers may find themselves finishing it in one sitting, unable to resist what happens next.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo

A Botanist's Guide to Parties and Poisons by Kate Khavari



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