

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

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MAGAZINE

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and movies out West

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

From action adventures to sci-fi to procedurals, it's the perfect time to find something new you'll love.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

Western horror, clairvoyants, the objects of romantic mysteries—this winter's edition of *Mystery & Suspense Magazine* has something for everyone. Fans of stories from cozy mysteries to international adventure (and everything in between) will find delightful features here. Not to mention reviews of some of the best new and upcoming thrillers, horror, crime, mysteries, and more.

Plus, we have interviews from some of the legends and rising stars of genre fiction—Dennis Lehane, Jane Harper, and Elle Cosimano. You'll learn about their upcoming titles, as well as how they came up with their characters, what they're reading, and what's next in their careers.

There's so much in this issue—reviews, short fiction, interviews, and features. If you're anything like me, you'll be running to your local bookstore or library to pick up something to read in this season of short days and long nights. Maybe you'll find inspiration here for that next great book.

Happy reading,
Sam

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Elle Cosimano

Elle Cosimano is a *USA Today* bestselling author, an International Thriller Award winner, a Bram Stoker Award finalist, and an Edgar Award nominee. Her acclaimed young adult novels include *Nearly Gone*, *Holding Smoke*, *The Suffering Tree*, and *Seasons of the Storm*.

Elle’s debut novel for adults, *Finlay Donovan Is Killing It*, kicked off a witty, fast-paced contemporary mystery series, which was a *People Magazine* Pick and was named one of New York Public Library’s Best Books of 2021. In addition to writing novels for teens and adults, her essays have appeared in *The Huffington Post* and *Time*. Cosimano lives with her husband and two sons in Virginia.

Q. Our reviewers have called your books “screwball comedy mysteries” and *Finlay Donovan* “Reminiscent of Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum.” How would you describe your writing? From where does it draw its power?

Elle: I’ve been a huge fan of Janet Evanovich (and Stephanie Plum) for many years, so anytime I hear Finlay mentioned in comparison it makes me a little giddy. There’s something so refreshing and fun about these “screwball comedy mysteries,” but I think where these books truly draw their power is in the way they resist genre boundaries. The Finlay Donovan books are mysteries at their heart, but they’re so many other things too. They’re nail-biting thrillers, dark comedies, and even romances. They’re inspiring stories of a woman getting back on her feet and the power of unconditional friendship. They glide between category lines without regard for genre expectations or rules, making them something all their own. The series draws its power from that irreverent and honest voice as much as its broad appeal. Somehow, by not worrying if the books would land on one particular shelf, Finlay and I have managed to find a welcoming home on all of them!

Q. *Finlay Donovan Jumps the Gun* has hot cops, mob bosses, spies, and all the hilarity readers have come to expect from this series. How did the story unfold for you?

Elle: I never get bored writing Finlay’s stories! One day, I might be writing an edge-of-your-seat high-speed chase or a tense, obstacle-riddled sleuthing mission. The next, I might be writing sexy, smart banter or a smoldering kiss. But I think

the scenes I love most are the ones that reveal to me the heart of the story I’m telling—a brutally blunt argument between Finlay and her ex-husband, a deep conversation between Finlay and her mother, or a moment of clarity between Finlay her love interest, Nick. These are the moments that help me see the full potential of my character arcs as much as the potential in the plot of the story.

Q. Finlay is a singularly relatable character. How did she first appear to you?

Elle: Finlay’s voice first became clear to me during a hectic #momlife morning. I’d been up all night writing, chasing a looming deadline while we were on our family vacation, when my two children woke me up early because they were bickering over the bed they were forced to share in the too-cozy rustic cabin we were renting. My husband was snoring loudly beside me, blissfully unaware of all of it. As I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, Finlay’s first thoughts came to me clearly and suddenly. They also became the opening lines of the series: It’s a widely known fact that most moms are ready to kill someone by eight-thirty a.m. on any given morning. On the particular morning of Tuesday, October 8th, I was ready by seven forty-five.

Finlay’s voice is very distinct but, as you’ve noted, also deeply relatable. She feels real, both as a mother and a woman

struggling to regain her footing after a massive life upheaval. Her character is one we sympathize with, maybe because we see bits and pieces of our own selves and struggles within her. Because of this connection, we feel invested in her growth. Despite her flaws, we root for her. As the series progresses, we see Finlay rediscover herself as a woman, as a mother, as a friend, and as a writer. As her confidence grows, so do the stakes.

Q. The friendship between Finlay and Vero has a lot of readers coming back. What does that friendship mean to you?

Elle: I consider Vero and Finlay’s relationship the mast of the series. Their friendship was inspired in part by my own relationship with my two beloved critique partners, Megan Miranda and Ashley Elston. The three of us have been writing side-by-side for a little over a decade. During that time, we’ve supported each other through the publication of nearly thirty books! We all started writing professionally around the same time, each of us struggling to juggle the demands of motherhood with our fragile, budding careers. I couldn’t imagine being where I am without their support, encouragement, and unconditional friendship. I guess I wanted Finlay to have someone like that, too.



Elle Cosimano’s latest:
Finlay Donovan Jumps the Gun

Finlay Donovan has been in messes before—after all, she’s an author and single mom who’s a pro at getting out bloodstains for rather unexpected reasons—but none quite like this. After she and her nanny/partner-in-crime Vero accidentally destroyed a luxury car that they may have “borrowed” in the process of saving the life of Finlay’s ex-husband, the Russian mob got her out of debt. But now Finlay owes them.

Still running the show from behind bars, mob boss Feliks has a task for Finlay: find a contract killer before the cops do. Problem is, the killer might be an officer.

Luckily, hot cop Nick has started up a citizen’s police academy, and combined pressure from Finlay’s looming book deadline and Feliks is enough to convince Finlay and Vero to get involved. Through firearm training and forensic classes (and some hands-on research with the tempting detective), Finlay and Vero have the perfect cover-up to sleuth out the real criminal and free themselves from the mob’s clutches—all the while dodging spies, confronting Vero’s past, and juggling the daily trials of parenthood.

Demystifying the Clairvoyant

BY ANNABELLE LEWIS

Clairvoyant literally means “clear-sighted.” It can be used as an adjective, as in, “I’m not clairvoyant, so I didn’t see it coming.” Or as a noun—a person who has extrasensory perception, as in, “I’m making bank as a clairvoyant!”

A person with such ability (or who at least claims to have it) is known by many names. Depending on their specific skill set or predilection, they could be called a seer, prophet, sibyl, soothsayer, oracle, medium, spiritualist, mentalist, astrologer, telepath, mind reader, fortune teller, numerologist, visionary ... or quack, if you’re so inclined.





HISTORY

As long as man has walked the earth, people have been in search of answers to the great questions. Civilizations have formed around beliefs, traditions, and superstitions. And despite loads of evidence for psychic fraud and fakery, many believe in the supernatural. Some studies show that those believers tend to be less analytical. But a truly analytical thinker should be the first to admit that they don't have the answers. Which makes room for the *what if*.

Today, going to a psychic "just for fun" may be frowned upon—like it's a gateway drug for radical thinking. However, kings, historical figures, and average people on every continent have explored the unknown in unconventional ways and consulted with those who claim otherworldly insights.

Roman priests would read the guts of sacrificed animals to read the future. Rasputin steered the Romanov family and the court of Czar Nicholas II so far off course he abetted their downfall. Hitler and Goebbels were followers of astrology, and British intelligence services planted horoscope predictions to their own advantage, but both sides used astrology for propaganda. One specific quatrain from Nostradamus, the French astronomer and seer, was used as "proof" of Germany's actions and destiny: "The great empire, dismembered early/Will grow from the inside out/From a small country/In his lap the sceptre shall rest."

Yeah. Nostradamus was good. He left vague and general predictions that people are still puzzling over today. But as in any work, cherry-picked content and the use of individual interpretation can be dangerous. Or profitable.

IS THERE ANYTHING TO IT?

Do the words "mother's intuition" ring true to your ears? What about déjà vu? Ask almost anyone if they've ever experienced an unexplained occurrence of foresight and the answer will most likely be yes. And while there are laws of biology and nature, nature evolves. Who is to say what part of the brain might advance? What about the use of advanced pharmacology or the introduction of mutant DNA?

Genius is real, as are prodigious savants—people born with extraordinary abilities or splinter skills that cannot be explained. Studies on brain function and plasticity have not reached their limits. Should not extrasensory perception remain on the list until definitively disproven? Some would say there is no way to disprove it, so hey, no argument will ever be conclusive.

BOOKS

It all begins with stories and legends. Before the modern age, there were only stories passed from generation to generation, but once they began writing the tales down, they became something called books (and then movies).

The Legend of Arthur began before the 11th century. Part of the story revolves around Morgan le Fay, the mother of Mordred, a powerful enchantress who tricks Merlyn the Enchanter. Ever heard of those two wizards?

Shakespeare used soothsayers in *Antony and Cleopatra*. And the soothsayer gets the big line: "Beware the Ides of March." Bingo.

In the modern era, we've turned to Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and too many authors to list. Paranormal stories about things that can't be explained are wildly popular, in particular a sub-genre known as paranormal romance that covers a broad range of relationships with vampires, time travelers, ghosts, and other beings.

MOVIES

The list of movies dealing with clairvoyants spans psychic horror, thriller, mystery, comedy, fantasy, action, crime, and even family movies.

The Wizard of Oz—the psychic relevance is in the title. And Professor Marvel, although portrayed as a probable con artist, did seem like a pretty decent guy. "Poor little kid, I hope she gets home alright."

Phenomenon, *Ghost*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Family Plot*, *The Mothman Prophecies*, *Hereafter*, *Lucy*, and *The Conjuring* all made their mark on the big screen.

At least five notable films written by Stephen King featured clairvoyant elements: *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, and *The Green Mile*.

There are other movies with a charming take on the supernatural. In *All of Me*, Lily Tomlin's wealthy invalid character thinks she has found a way to live forever by having her soul transferred into a brass pot. But the psychic miscalculates, and when she dies she goes into Steve Martin's body. The end is beautiful and life-affirming, a story well told. *Only You* features Marisa Tomei following the love advice of a psychic

and finding Robert Downey, Jr. In the classic Tom Hanks flick *Big*, the "psychic" was a machine named Zoltar, but he held a crystal ball and performed magic, so I'm counting it.

MODERN CULTURE

The use of psychics in police work is a real thing. While controversial, it is ongoing. Naturally, the CIA has done studies on clairvoyance, spending millions. But no surprise, most of that government-funded research is classified. Some of the research was done because the U.S. was worried that the Soviets were ahead of us in utilizing these powers. That old chestnut.

There are also charlatans who claim they can speak to the dead and take advantage of people suffering. But what if these psychics comfort people? You get what you pay for.

FOR ME

I'll end with a personal story. I was once at a New Year's Eve party where the host hired a palm reader/psychic. I'd been experiencing a lot of emotional pain dealing with my young son with autism and worrying endlessly about his future.

As I sat in front of the woman with a smile on my face and nothing but a "this should be fun" notion in my heart, something changed. The moment she took my hand and said, "Ask me a question," I went to my root cause of pain. "Will my son be okay?" The psychic glanced at me and then stared again at my palm for what seemed a weighty amount of time before dropping my hand and sitting back. She gave me a determined look and stated flatly, "I see nothing wrong with your son."

And just like that my heart broke. Because I'd never looked at my son through that lens. My child was perfect, for he was who he was meant to be. That tiny piece of psychic illumination was a tremendous gift. And one that I carry to this day.



About the author

Annabelle Lewis is a pseudonym for the author, who lives in Minneapolis with her husband, children, and a wild thug of a dog who sleeps beside her. A multi-genre writer and publisher of ten novels to date, all her books have a theme—taking down the bad guy. In addition to fighting evil, The Boston Clairvoyants mysteries/thrillers also contain a bit of romance and a mythological hierarchy. (And dog lovers will adore the books.) Follow Annabelle at theannabellelewis.com.



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Jane Harper

Jane Harper is the author of bestsellers *The Dry*, *Force of Nature*, *The Lost Man*, *The Survivors*, and *Exiles*. Her books are published in 40 territories worldwide, with more than 3.5 million copies sold to date.

Jane has won numerous awards for writing, including the CWA Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel, the British Book Awards Crime and Thriller Book of the Year, the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year and the Australian Indie Awards Book of the Year. The major motion picture adaptation of *The Dry*, starring Eric Bana as Aaron Falk, took more than \$20.5 million at the Australian box office ahead of its release dates overseas.

Q. *Exiles* is the third installment in the Aaron Falk series, and another hit that this time takes place in South Australia. How does setting—something you’re famous for—influence this story?

Jane: This story is an Australian mystery sparked by the disappearance of a new mother in the beautiful South Australian wine country, and was a lot of fun to write. It’s the final book featuring federal investigator Aaron Falk, and this time he finds himself increasingly entwined in this tight-knit community in a way that’s somewhat new to him. The freshness and beauty of South Australia’s wine country stood out to me immediately as the right setting for *Exiles*. There’s a dark note at the heart of the book, but there’s also a lot of light in this story and I wanted a setting that captured that. Bringing the gorgeous scenery and lifestyle on the page was an absolute joy, and the research trips for this book were particularly fabulous!

Q. For readers who don’t know, who is Aaron Falk? What drives him? What haunts him?

Jane: I wrote *Exiles* knowing it would be Aaron Falk’s final book, so in many ways this novel is my goodbye letter to him. He’s such a special character to me, having been with me since the first page of my first book, *The Dry*, and then returned in the follow-up *Force of Nature*. As a financial investigator, his tendency towards a fairly work-drive and solitary life is challenged in *Exiles* as he reunites with his old friend

Greg Raco and is drawn deeper into life in the lush Marralee Valley. I love writing about Falk so it’s very bittersweet to bring his journey to a close, but ending a story well in fiction is just as important as starting it well—arguably even more so—and I wanted to give Falk the considered ending that he deserves.

Q. What’s on your nightstand right now?

Jane: Benjamin Stevenson’s dazzlingly fresh take on the classic crime genre, *Everyone in My Family Has Killed Someone*. I highly recommend it.

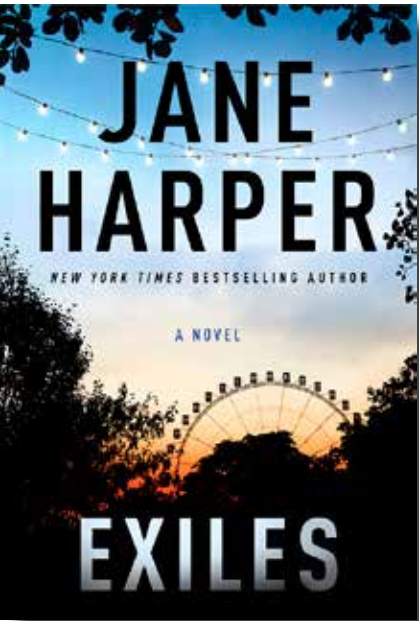
Q. You originally wrote your breakout hit, *The Dry*, as part of a 12-week online novel-writing course in 2014. How has life and writing changed for you since then?

Jane: With every book, I learn something new about writing, and one of the best changes has been having an opportunity to really streamline my own process and improve my techniques. I vividly remember being an aspring

author and not knowing where to even begin when it came to attempting to write a whole novel. There’s a lot of advice out there, but if I could go back to that early stage, I’d love to reassure myself and other aspring writers that it does get easier. The more you write, the more you absolutely learn what works for you to get your own story on the page, so keep hitting the keyboard and keep the faith!

Q. What’s next?

Jane: I’ll be visiting the U.S. in early February for some events around the release of *Exiles*, which I’m excited about. My thoughts always drift towards the next book, but I have two young children—aged three and six—so feel some family time is definitely in order!



Jane Harper’s latest: *Exiles*

Federal Investigator Aaron Falk is on his way to a small town deep in Southern Australian wine country for the christening of an old friend’s baby. But mystery follows him, even on vacation.

This weekend marks the one-year anniversary of Kim Gillespie’s disappearance. One year ago, at a busy town festival on a warm spring night, Kim safely tucked her sleeping baby into her stroller, then vanished into the crowd. No one has seen her since. When Kim’s older daughter makes a plea for anyone with information about her missing mom to come forward, Falk and his old buddy Raco can’t leave the case alone.

As Falk soaks up life in the lush valley, he is welcomed into the tight-knit circle of Kim’s friends and loved ones. But the group may be more fractured than it seems. Between Falk’s closest friend, the missing mother, and a woman he’s drawn to, dark questions linger as long-ago truths begin to emerge. What would make a mother abandon her child? What happened to Kim Gillespie?

Romantic Objects of Mysteries



From a giant emerald to a stowaway, mysterious objects have enormous appeal in some of our favorite mysteries.

BY DEBORAH L. CANNON

Lucy Waring, a young, out-of-work actress, visits her sister on a Greek island and finds a suspicious object at the bottom of a pool inside a cave. As she steals it, she sees its owner coming, and there she is—stuck with his precious package, for which he had murdered twice—with no way to escape, while the man she loves has gone to the mainland for help.

What does Mary Stewart's novel *This Rough Magic* have in common with *Romancing the Stone*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *North by Northwest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Moonstone*, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*? They are all romantic mysteries involving a mysterious object.

Romantic mystery is a broad term that crosses over many genres. But this kind of classic tale contains an unexplained object and an intertwining love story.

WHY MYSTERIOUS OBJECTS?

Two mutually attracted historians go into the past and one of them brings back something she’s not supposed to. *To Say Nothing of the Dog* by Connie Willis is a time travel story that sends Ned and Verity to Victorian England to hunt for an object. Science fiction, yes, but also a romantic mystery involving two mysterious things—the bishop’s bird stump and a stowaway. Some things are best left unfound; they can only lead to havoc. But that doesn’t stop one of the historians who returns to the future with a cat instead of the bishop’s bird stump. And that begs the question: why the bishop’s bird stump?

The strange or unexpected hold our interest. Despite the uncanny glow of the emerald in *Romancing the Stone*, and the unknowable secrets inside the Ark in *Raiders*, Joan Wilder needs the emerald to pay the ransom and Indy wants the Ark because it belongs in a museum.

The reasons mysterious objects show up in romance are manifold, ranging from their personal or cultural value, to their monetary worth, to their effect on future events, to their uncanniness. Sometimes the pursuit is encouraged by love (to impress Cheryl) as in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. The coveted object is a photographic negative. What is on Negative 25? The answer to that question keeps us riveted.

THE ROMANCE OF MYSTERIOUS OBJECTS

Rachel, a young aristocratic woman, is given an Indian diamond brought to 19th century England as spoils of war on her eighteenth birthday. When the stone is stolen, suspicion falls on her housemaid, a troop of visiting Indian jugglers, the man she loves, and on Rachel herself. Rachel knows who stole the diamond and the detective knows she knows. Why won’t she tell?

The fact that an object can embody myth, be cursed, or steer us into the dark secrets of the past infuses it with romance. The diamond in *The Moonstone* has all of this. What’s more, Rachel won’t betray the thief because she loves him, and when we learn that the thief stole the diamond in a drug-induced hypnosis, we know her feelings are justified.

As well as being the perfect foil in a love story, mysterious objects can make dreams come true. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Ark gives its owner absolute power. In *Romancing the Stone*, the giant emerald represents freedom. For Jack Colton, that is the ability to buy a sailboat; for Joan Wilder, it is the ransom for her sister’s release from kidnappers.

In Lily King’s *Euphoria*, a novel loosely based on anthropologist Margaret Mead’s personal and professional life, the cryptic object is a sacred flute, ultimately stolen from a New Guinea tribe by the heroine’s egotistical husband, a metaphor for his threatened masculinity and the reason the heroine falls for the other man.

And in *North by Northwest*, the hollow statue itself matters more than what is actually hidden inside it. Which makes it doubly romantic. Everyone is after the statue, but by story’s end we still don’t know what is on the microfilm. And this adds to the allure, suggesting that love is compatible with adventure—a high-octane dash into mayhem—that risks life and heart.

CURIOSITY KILLED THE CAT

When an object is mysterious and romantic it promises that things will work out, and because of this it can’t help but make us curious.

Detective Sam Spade accepts a kidnap case brought to him by a beautiful stranger. When his partner Miles Archer investigates, he and the suspect end up dead. Meanwhile, Spade is approached by a sinister character who demands he locate a priceless statuette, and Spade realizes he must find this thing they all seem to want—the Maltese Falcon.

Readers and movie goers are drawn to stories that create suspense by taking advantage of their natural curiosity. Strange relics intrigue because people are curious by nature. This gets them into deep trouble. After all the confusion, puzzlement and deaths, our curiosity is rewarded when we learn why these men died for the statue and why a woman was willing to kill. Underneath the covering of black enamel, the statue is encrusted with jewels. Once again greed corrupts, and has throughout history; and people will resort to murder to possess the Maltese Falcon.

SECRET POWERS

Some objects, especially ancient relics, have great power even if that power is not supernatural. They reveal secrets and affect peoples’ interactions in love, family, friendship, and work, bringing them together or splitting them apart.

In the Indiana Jones quartet, Indy’s excessive pursuit of cryptic artifacts endangers his loved ones: Marion in *Raiders*, Short Round in *The Temple of Doom*, his father in *The Last Crusade*, and his son in *The Crystal Skull*.

Rachel’s dilemma in *The Moonstone* has strong implications for her happiness. Should she marry her heart’s desire or choose someone with matching values? And when the evidence points to the man she loves as the thief, should she betray him or let someone else be blamed? This decision will make or break her life.

Joan Wilder endangers her sister when she falls for adventurer Jack Colton, who tricks her into procuring the buried emerald despite the warnings of the kidnappers. Quiet, unobtrusive Walter Mitty daydreams about Cheryl

until he goes on a mission for *Life Magazine*. In his hunt to retrieve Negative 25, he is forced to confront bigger-than-life challenges, ultimately boosting his confidence and enabling him to ask Cheryl for a date.

These are actions with life-changing consequences that happen when characters pursue mysterious objects.

WHAT MAKES AN OBJECT MYSTERIOUS?

People are unnerved by uncertainty, which drives them to seek explanations. But just because we want to know doesn’t mean it will be explained. By the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we experience the supernatural power of the Ark. But *In North by Northwest*, the hero is framed for murder, and thugs and government agents pursue a Mexican statue filled with microfilm, which leads to mayhem. All the while our hero is aided by his romantic interest, a woman spy who ends up clinging to the edge of a cliff. The statue contains microfilm, but the content of that film is never revealed.



What's important is that the hero escapes and the lovers reunite. As for what's on the microfilm? By the end of the movie, we no longer care. That is one powerfully mysterious object.

THE MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AND THE MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER

In romantic mystery, the search for the mysterious doesn't end with the mysterious object. Characters are mysterious, too. You know what to expect when an outspoken person gets into a jam; you wonder what the quiet one has got up their sleeve. In Lily King's *Euphoria*, we always know how Fen the husband is going to react—with brute action. We aren't quite sure how the thoughtful Nell will react. The more information you share about yourself with others, the more power you hand over. Hence Brigid in *The Maltese Falcon* and Eve in *North by Northwest* remain powerful enigmas—until their motives are exposed.

RESTORING ORDER

In fiction, a character's world is a place of cause and effect. Once Joan Wilder is out of her comfort zone, abandoned in the jungle, the result is disaster. She responds by

hiring Jack to be her guide. This action shows logic as she reacts to her predicament. But sometimes the world is random. Joan suddenly loses control of her life when thugs go after her and the jewel. The mysterious object becomes an element of randomness, which is why, if our hero can get hold of the object—be it the emerald, the Ark, the statue, Negative 25, or the bishop's bird stump—order is restored. And all is once more right with the world.

Variations of romantic mystery revolving around a mysterious object have been around since Wilkie Collins's 1868 novel *The Moonstone*. It is not only the first hard-boiled detective novel, but also the first romantic mystery with a mysterious object. From the 1950s to mid 70s, Mary Stewart consolidated the genre. Recent iterations like the Paramount TV series *Blood and Treasure* and fiction series like the Sam and Remi Fargo Adventures created by Clive Cussler have evolved from detecting to action, but remain at heart romantic mysteries. Still others have segued to cozy romantic mysteries like Hallmark's *Garage Sale Mysteries*. How the genre will evolve in the future is anyone's guess, but one thing remains for certain: there will likely be a couple coming together and a mysterious object to pursue.



About the author

From Europe to the Far East to the South Pacific, **Deborah L. Cannon** travels for work and play. Her fascination with mysterious objects led her to earn university degrees in anthropology and museum studies. Her first job was to sketch a 2,000-year-old skeleton holding obsidian blades in each of its hands. Years later, while working as an archaeological illustrator, she learned the blades were stolen. Now author of the romantic mystery series *Fresco Nights*, she lives in Hamilton, Ontario with her archaeologist husband and two dogs.

FEATURE

WESTERN HORROR

Why speculative horror books and movies out West are some of the scariest—and some of our favorite.

BY MICHAEL CARTER

The American West is a great place to live and visit. Wide open spaces. Faraway places. Natural beauty. Clean air. Small towns. Friendly faces. Outdoor lifestyle. Individualism.

It can also be scary.

Consider speculative horror fiction, for instance, the genre that best explores and attempts to explain our fears. Books and movies set in the American West are often some of the scariest. Here, I'll look at three main examples and also explore whether they are, in fact, "Westerns."

WHAT IS A WESTERN?

The "Western" is my country's unique contribution to literature and film. Historians have attempted to define the genre since its inception. It will always be debatable where the West begins, the period it encompasses, and the content it represents. Most people think of "Western" as the Old West or Early Frontier of the United States. These are often called "Traditional" or "Classic" Westerns. They frequently involve cowboys with six-shooters on horses, battles against American Indians on grassy plains marked with bison, the damsel in distress, bank robberies, stagecoaches, and hangings. Main characters often look like Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), and tough, resilient frontierswomen of the likes of Allyn Ann McLerie ("Crazy Woman") in *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972).

While those tropes, settings, and characters were certainly the genesis of the Western genre, it extends well beyond that. If you include Revisionist Westerns, Modern/Contemporary/Neo-Westerns, Pickup Westerns (pickup trucks instead of horses), and Anti-Westerns, the field broadens significantly. I like to think of Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973) as an example that flips Traditional Western on its head. And what about Grit Lit set in the American West or that deals with Western problems, such as water rights or the subdivision taking over the family farm? You can see from this that the genre is incredibly broad, including current times, urban settings, and how we imagine the West in the future.

THE WESTERN MEETS HORROR

Using our expansive understanding of Westerns, let's look at some speculative horror. I have focused on books adapted to movies as my three primary examples.

I'll start with an author/director I've already mentioned, Crichton, and my favorite work of his, *The Andromeda*

Strain (book 1969; movie 1971). As the prefatory "Acknowledgments" section of the book explains, the story "recounts the five-day history of a major American scientific crisis," which we discover involves a dangerous pathogen that lands on Earth via a crashed military satellite.

"Hold your horses!" you say; "*The Andromeda Strain* is science fiction, a techno-thriller, a mystery. It's doubtfully horror, and I'd never call it a Western!"

Hear me out.

The Andromeda Strain is certainly a mash-up of those things. But it's also been described as "feel[ing] more like a cosmic horror film than it does an alien invasion thriller." So, it is horror and obviously speculative, but why should we also consider it Western?

First, location. The book begins in the small, sparsely populated town of Piedmont, Arizona, a real ghost town in our world, and in the movie, Piedmont, New Mexico, a fictional town. Later, after the satellite is found, it is taken to the secret underground "Project Wildfire" laboratory in fictional Flatrock, Nevada. Other areas throughout the American West are also essential to the storyline, including Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory in La Cañada Flintridge, California, and American universities throughout the West. The book and the movie even provide maps detailing critical places in five Western states.

But location is more important than simply occurring in the West; it highlights two meaningful Western qualities. The book and movie explain how the Wildfire site was chosen for its "remoteness" in the uninhabited Nevada desert. As Dr. Jeremy Stone, one of Crichton's characters, states, "There is no important area of habituation for a radius of nearly one hundred and twelve miles." Remoteness plays heavily on the paradoxical Western concept of being in a wide-open space, yet feeling claustrophobic simultaneously. Crichton and director Robert Wise milk that feeling of dread, going from a little town and then a base in the middle of nowhere, with the horizon expanding off to infinity, to the constricted, suffocating feeling of the underground laboratory, tiny examination rooms, and robot-arm chambers where the characters attempt to identify the pathogen.

The other important quality is government secrecy. Where else, besides the American West, could best convey the secret lab concept? Sure, perhaps China, as Dean Koontz prophetically described in *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981), "labs outside the city of Wuhan" where "man-made



microorganisms were created," including the "Wuhan-400" virus that infected humans. Or we might envision a secret Soviet ice base, such as in the Cold War comedy *Spies Like Us* (1985). But, when we think about secret government places, is there anything more notorious than Area 51, the U.S. government facility in the Nevada Test and Training Range? I contend that Project Wildfire's secrecy could only be captured to such degree in the American West. The *Andromeda Strain*, accordingly, is deeply Western.

HORROR IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Moving on, no discussion of speculative horror is complete without the King of Horror. Stephen King's books and movie adaptations are robustly Western. Most obvious, of course, is his Dark Tower series. The novels (1982-2004), novella *The Little Sisters of Eluria* (1998), and movie (2017)

clearly qualify as sci-fi fantasy Westerns and have elements of horror. So, let's turn to my second, not-so-obvious main example: *The Shining* (book 1977; movie 1980; mini-series 1997).

Whoa Nellie, you say, the Torrances are from Vermont, and even though The Overlook Hotel is in Colorado, that alone doesn't make it a Western!

Fair enough.

But we can dig a little deeper, starting with that setting. I've already discussed how remoteness is an important Western concept, and the Overlook's Colorado location, nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, certainly fits that bill. Could King have put the hotel and the notorious Sidewinder road in Stowe, Vermont, Miami, Florida, or anywhere else, and achieved the same sense of helplessness and inaccessibility, and realistically trigger cabin fever, the



way the Overlook’s location does? I don’t think so.

Other Western concepts are explored in *The Shining*, such as starvation and the plight of American Indians. In the movie, Danny kindly reminds us how the stranded Donner party “ate each other up” in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and Stuart Ullman, the manager of the Overlook, talks of the hotel’s site on Indian burial ground, allegations of “repelling Indian attacks as they were building it,” and the Navajo and Apache motifs in the hotel. (It has been argued that these references point to *The Shining* as a story about native American extermination.)

And what about suicide? In the movie, Ullman explains to Jack how his predecessor, Mr. Grady, “put both barrels of a shotgun in his mouth.” This highlights a statistic Westerners are not proud of but is endemic to the area: eight out of the top ten U.S. suicide rates are in the West, Colorado ranking seventh.

A treatise could be written about King’s Western speculative horror. In *The Shining’s* sequel, *Doctor Sleep*, the book (2013) returns West to the Bluebell Campground where the Overlook existed, and in the film (2019) to the hotel itself, and both touch on suicide.

The Stand (book 1978; mini-series 1994, 2020-21) displays many topics I’ve discussed and deserves its own article.

Even King’s novel *Christine* (1983), set in Pennsylvania, somehow makes it out West by the end. The movie (1983), set in Rockbridge, California, and filmed at various California high schools, depicts modern Western American public high school experience as well as any movie. The list goes on.

THE WESTERN SLASHER

My third example is *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones.

That’s it, Partner, you say, we’re going to hang you dry, that was never made into a movie!

You got me.

But I have included it here because if there ever was a Western speculative horror book that should be a movie, this is it.

Jones describes his novel as “a slasher through and through.” I won’t quibble with the author’s classification of his own work. Still, his story tracing the lives of four American Indians (I have used the term “American Indian” throughout in an attempt to comport with the characters’ usage in the book, who mostly reject the terms “Native,” “indigenous,” and “aboriginal”) following their indiscriminate slaughter of elk on elder hunting grounds, including a pregnant elk cow

that returns to haunt them, is loaded as a Western.

The setting is entirely Western, from North Dakota, to the Blackfeet and Crow reservations, to various cities in Montana. But, the most compelling aspect is the mix of traditional and modern Western themes; most importantly, the American Indian struggle to honor tradition while surviving today’s world. Jones also weaves traditional subjects such as scalping, the spirit world, sweat lodges, powwows, and “Custers,” with modern ones, such as crew-cab pickup trucks, IGA supermarkets, Elvis, and Indians with traditional and hip-hop names. Even the Elk Head Woman, one of the most terrifying creatures in literature, ties the past to the present. The human-bodied creature that haunts the characters, with an elk’s head and “yellowy” eyes, at times wearing gym shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and a sports bra, almost seems to fuse old with modern West.

Crichton, I recall, looked somewhat embarrassed when he was asked the presumptuous question of whether one

of his unfinished books was going to be a movie. King, it has been alleged, wrote many of his works with movie adaptations in mind. I don’t know about Jones, but his book sure reads like a movie. The Elk Head Woman ceiling-fan scenes, spotting her between railway cars, and the motorcycle wheel spoke “scalping,” are written with such visual precision that the reader can’t help but see them, in step-by-step procession, just like they might be presented on screen. Or, more accurately, like you’d see if you were right there with the characters.

Jones’s book should be a movie. Bringing it to the silver screen could make it one of the best and most important meldings of old with modern West, and further explain the genre. *The Only Good Indians*, and the blueprints laid out by Crichton, King, and others, also show that Western speculative horror, and how we define “Western,” is as vast as the West itself, and as broad as we choose to define it.



About the author

Michael Carter’s short fiction and creative nonfiction stories appear regularly in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies, and his most bothersome speculative flash fiction was recently collected in *Boneyard Tales* (Greenbelt Press 2022). He’s a lifelong resident of the Western United States and a member of the Western Writers of America. When he’s not at the keyboard or scavenging the boneyard, he can be found at the river’s edge fishing or RVing around the nation, and sometimes online at www.michaelcarter.ink and [@mcmichaelcarter](https://www.instagram.com/mcmichaelcarter).



Dennis Lehane
New York Times bestselling author
dennislehane.com

Dennis Lehane

Dennis has written several novels, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Mystic River*, which was later made into an Academy Award winning film directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, and Kevin Bacon. (Lehane can be briefly seen waving from a car in the parade scene at the end of the film.) The novel was a finalist for the PEN/Winship Award and won the Anthony Award and the Barry Award for Best Novel, the Massachusetts Book Award in Fiction, and France’s Prix Mystere de la Critique.

INTERVIEW BY VALERIE J. BROOKS

Q. Dennis, my big question, first of all, is are you really going to leave literature behind for TV?

Dennis: No, it’s not a guarantee. I have a book coming out in April, *Small Mercies*, which is arguably the best book I’ve ever written. I am very pleased with that. It gave me a certain bit of pride again, but the issue is that books grew exponentially more difficult for me, book by book by book. They became harder and harder to write.

Q. Why was that?

Dennis: I’m a very focused father, and I like being there for my kids. But I can’t be there for my kids in the same way when I’m writing a novel, because it takes so much of my focus. That’s for me, but not for everyone. Writing a novel takes a lot of emotional and psychological turmoil. Whereas with a script, I could write one on the 50-yard line during the Superbowl.

Q. Doesn’t it take the same focus for developing a show?

Dennis: In terms of running a show, I can bring my kids to work with me. My girls will always remember the summer they spent on the set of *Black Bird*. They were there all the time, running around, and having a blast in southern Louisiana and New Orleans. They were nine and twelve at that point.

In *Black Bird*, there’s a scene at a bait shop where actors Greg Kinnear and Sepi (Sepideh Moafi) pull up in a car, get out, and walk up the steps to the bait shop while a woman and two little girls come down the steps. That’s my wife and girls. We put them in the scene at the last second. So, the girls consider that going to work with dad. They also consider Taron (Egerton) and Paul (Walter Hauser) to be like uncles to them. Sepi is like their favorite aunt now. I love giving that to them.

Q. Tell me the difference between that and what happens with the girls when you’re writing a novel.

Dennis: They don’t understand what I do as a writer. They don’t see it. It’s just something that puts daddy in a bad mood. I’m very distracted when I write. I don’t want to pay that price, essentially, and there’s no reason to. I’ve established my beachhead.

If I want to go back and write another book again, I will. But I’m out of contract for the first time since 1996. I’m free. And unfettered. I owe nobody anything, and that’s a great place to be. It’s wonderful. I’m aware of the luxury of this, and I’m very grateful. Yet, if another book occurs to me the way *Small Mercies* occurred to me, then I’ll write it, but I’m not going to hunt for a story.

Q. That’s the place every writer dreams of, right?

Dennis: Yes, that’s the dream. But think about it—I was under contract with HarperCollins for 26 years. It’s been a joy, but it’s been a yoke. It’s been a long time of I owe them a book, I owe them a book, I owe them a book.

But if I leave on this book, *Small Mercies*, then dammit, I left the stage on a high note.

Q. Let’s talk about your most recent book, *Since We Fell*. Rachel is such a troubled character. Tell me what inspired you to write Rachel?

Dennis: I think it was a conscious decision to break away from the world I remembered, the world that I wrote about in most of my books.

I’ve always wanted to write a Hitchcockian thriller, as I was heavily influenced by him. So that was in play. Then I had a vision of a woman who has an on-air mental breakdown, and that causes her to be agoraphobic. My God, can you imagine the fear of the outside world? If you’re agoraphobic, would you know anything about the outside world that wasn’t given or told to you? That means you put a lot of trust in somebody. But what if that person is not worthy of that trust?

But after I finished the novel, I didn’t like it. In fact, I hated it. I do have a contract with a reader as a novelist. I must give you the most entertaining book I can, period. That’s it. That’s my job. So, I realized I needed to devote much more to the opening act, to the trauma that created her, and I rewrote the beginning. To me, the beginning was the book.

I go back to Hitchcock here. Look at the opening act of *Psycho*. It starts as one movie about a woman doing some pretty underhanded shit. And then she goes to a hotel and dies. That’s why it’s great.

Q. What projects are you working on now?

Dennis: I have a pet project with Taron that I’ve been talking to him about. When we finally bring this to Apple, I will say, “I want you to do it, but I want you to understand, however, that this is only for Emmys. You’ll never get viewers. We’ll get it done as cheaply as we can.” And they’re so great that I hope they say, “Yes. Thanks.” That’s what I dream of. So that’s my life right now. And I love it. I absolutely love it.



Dennis Lehane’s latest: *Since We Fell*

Rachel Childs is a former journalist who, after an on-air mental breakdown, now lives as a virtual shut-in. In all other respects, however, she enjoys an ideal life with an ideal husband.

Until a chance encounter on a rainy afternoon causes that ideal life to fray. As does Rachel’s marriage. As does Rachel herself.

Sucked into a conspiracy thick with deception, violence, and possibly madness, Rachel must find the strength within herself to conquer unimaginable fears and mind-altering truths.



The Curious Case of the Cozy

Think you're safe with a cozy mystery?
Think again. There's a lot of complexity—and
a lot of real danger—within these pages.

BY ALICE CASTLE

Everybody thinks they know what cozy crime is. It is dismissed as the sort of story you can read by the fire, with a cup of tea, knowing that even though you are reading about murder most foul, nothing you come across will really touch you deeply.

But very few cozy crime novels are actually that superficial. What they are good at doing, however, is lulling you into a false sense of security so that you think the murders within the pages you are turning so rapidly don't matter. But at the heart of the cozy crime is a strong sense of justice. Each murder is an affront to that cast-iron belief in right and wrong, and it must, by the time the book is finished, be avenged so that balance can be restored.

It's been said that Dame Agatha Christie was the doyenne of the cozy story, but anyone familiar with her books will notice a lurking coldness at the heart of her novels which is often anything but cuddly. Christie was pitiless in bumping off her characters, with at least a handful meeting their doom in most of her books. The body count actually reaches double figures in *Death Comes as the End* and *And Then There Were None*. However, in Miss Marple, she did perhaps create the perfect prototype of a cozy sleuth—a forensically

gifted investigator, in the form of a fluffy little old lady who is consistently overlooked by policemen and murderers alike.

Miss Marple's first appearance was in a short story in 1927, and was followed by the novel *The Murder at the Vicarage* in 1930. And, since then, the premier resident of St. Mary Mead has set the tone for cozy protagonists. They are well-meaning amateurs, almost always women, they are frequently under-employed but nursing unsuspected skills which come in very handy in murder investigations and, mostly importantly of all, they are magnets for trouble.

There are a few honorable exceptions to the female only rule. Prolific cozy-monger M.C. Beaton wrote thirty-three novels starring Hamish MacBeth, who is not only male, but also a professional, in that he is a policeman. However, he is pretty workshy and does his level best to avoid promotion or a transfer which might pitch him out of his fictional hometown in the Scottish Highlands.

Simon Brett's long-running Charles Paris series of cozies feature an extremely unprofessional actor with an alcohol problem. He finds it hard to get work, but easy to blunder into mysteries. The first, *Cast in Order of Disappearance*, was published in 1975 and the latest, *A Deadly Habit*, came out in 2018. Among the joys of the series are Charles's long-

suffering wife, Frances, his slightly unsatisfactory daughter, Juliet, awful son-in-law, Miles, and rapacious agent, Maurice.

Faith Martin's Trudy Lovejoy also breaks the mold as she is a police officer, and a hard-working one, too—but in the 1960s, so that's alright. The books are set in Oxford and make good use of the maze of old colleges, picturesque streets, punts on the river, and dreaming spires to anchor the stories.

There is a good reason why cozy crimes are so firmly rooted in place, whether it be St. Mary Mead, a Scottish village, or the West End stage. These backdrops to the action are highly idealized in the books. It is their peace and tranquility, which so nurtures the amateur sleuth, that is disturbed by the murder(s) and must be restored by the end of the story.

In Richard Osman's fantastically successful cozy, *The Thursday Murder Club*, the setting is the old peoples' home in which his group of four wonderfully assorted amateur sleuths find themselves. It is crucial for their happiness, and for the rest of the community, that the mystery is solved so everyone can enjoy the peaceful retirement they deserve.

But not for long; there has already been a sequel to the first book, and a third instalment is eagerly awaited.

So the aim of every cozy is the very serious one of balancing the scales of justice. But that is not to say that the journey to restitution cannot be fun. While Agatha Christie wasn't much of a one for a joke, many cozy writers since her day have injected some comedy into their books. Janet Evanovich, whose books feature a particularly hapless female bounty hunter, includes a goofy dog, a terrible car, and a rogue grandma in the cast of characters to ensure some belly laughs along the way to banging up the bad guys. And there are also subsections of the genre, including jolly cozies about cats, cozies about food, cozies about aristocrats, cozies about golf, book groups, wine...

It is no mystery that, the more complicated and frustrating modern life becomes, the more tempting it is to disappear into the pages of a cozy mystery. But don't be fooled by their lavish scenery, their quirky protagonists, their chirpy tone, or the slickness of their solutions. Their real purpose is to make sure justice prevails—and that's no joke.



About the author

Before turning to crime, **Alice Castle** was a UK newspaper journalist for *The Daily Express*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Alice is an avid reader of crime fiction, and her favorite stories are cozy crimes with a strong sense of place. When she couldn't find a series about her beloved south London, she decided to write her own—and single mum amateur sleuth **Beth Haldane** was born. Alice also writes twisty psychological thrillers for HQ Digital under the name **A.M. Castle**. *The Perfect Widow* was a top selling audiobook in 2019 and *The Invitation* hit the top 50 on Amazon UK in 2021. Alice lives with her two children and two cats and, if she isn't writing or reading a whodunit, she'll be watching one on telly.

INTERNATIONAL

ADVENTURE

BOOKS

(FOR THE ARMCHAIR TRAVELER)

BY AVANTI CENTRAE

This time of year, a trip to the aquamarine beaches of Greece sounds lovely, doesn't it? Leave your worries behind, kick off your shoes, and dig your toes into the cool white sand! Can you smell the salty sea breeze and the Coppertone sunscreen?

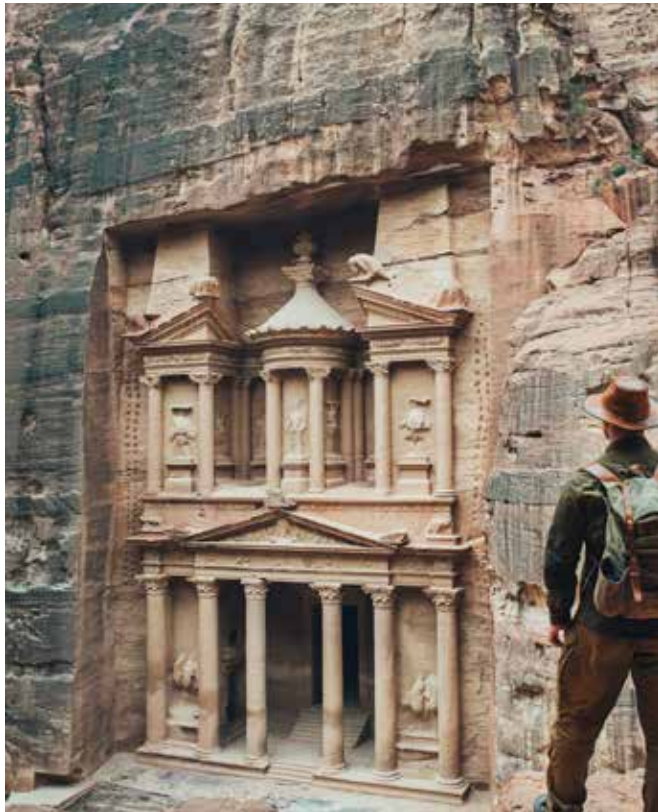
Or perhaps you've been yearning to head to Egypt or China, where you can explore mankind's oldest wonders. The pyramids would be fantastic, the Great Wall, a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Wait. What about the cost? Is it safe? We'll need too much time off work!

Who will watch the dogs? And the kids! They're too young. Or need funds for college.

If you're hungry for an escape, but traveling from your armchair is more your speed right now, check out the wide range of action novels available these days.

No longer simply mindless pulp fiction, today's action thrillers accommodate a wide variety of interests. There are almost as many flavors as there are ice cream choices. Here are some author and book recommendations to guide you toward your next armchair adventure.



Love historical conspiracies with your action thrills?

Try Steve Berry’s Cotton Malone series or David S. Brody’s Templars in America series. Malone is a former operative for the U.S. Justice Department trying unsuccessfully to enjoy his quiet new life as an antiquarian book dealer. Brody’s books are set in the Americas and based on artifacts left by Templar Knights during a secret mission to North America six hundred years ago. Both Berry and Brody are masters at mixing fact and fiction.

More of a science guy or gal?

Put James Rollins’ Sigma Force series high on your list. He jokingly refers to this series as “scientists with guns.” Or, Tim Tigner’s *The Price of Time* is a smart thriller dealing with the unintended consequences of immortality.

Want outlandish, over-the-top action?

Matthew Reilly’s Jack West, Jr series will make your jaw drop with imaginative escapades that take place in pyramids, caves, tombs, and jungles.

Ancient mysteries?

Dan Brown’s Robert Langdon series is the standard bearer. Everyone has heard of *The Da Vinci Code*, but his latest, *Origin*, does an even better job exploring the dark corridors of hidden history and extreme religion.

Prefer less blood and more mystery?

Try Daniel Silva’s Gabriel Allon series. Like Cotton Malone, Allon is another hero trying to put his past behind him. Attempting to immerse himself in the pedestrian life of an art restorer, former Israeli intelligence operative Gabriel Allon is called on to use his former skills time and again in the pursuit of solving international mysteries.

Want more adrenaline and less of that pesky character growth?

Lots of options here for the CIA-operative lone-wolf saving-the-world trope: Barry Eisler’s John Rain series, Tom Clancy/Marc Cameron/Don Bentley’s Jack Ryan series, Lee Child’s Jack Reacher series, Al Pessin’s Task Force Epsilon series, Mark Greaney’s The Gray Man series (also a heart-thumping Netflix movie!), and Ted Bell’s *Alex Hawke* are worth your time. Collectively, they hit all the jet-setting locales from Bangkok and Singapore, to Afghanistan and Cambodia, to Paris and Peru.

Perhaps you prefer espionage, treachery, and intrigue?

Check out Robert Dugoni’s Charles Jenkins cat-and-mouse series about a retired CIA case officer in the fight of his life.

Or maybe you feel nostalgic for good ole *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-type classic adventure?

Clive Cussler has several series with those plot elements, including the Dirk Pitt Adventures, the NUMA files, the Oregon Files, Isaac Bell, and the Sam and Remi Fargo Adventures. David Woods also has several series featuring Dane Maddock, Ernest Dempsey’s Sean Wyatt series is sure to please, and Kevin Tumlinson’s Dan Kotler series are all great choices to get your blood pumping while eating popcorn on the couch.

Like learning about the never-ending conflict in the Middle East?

Joel Rosenberg lives in Israel, which gives his work authenticity. You can enjoy the Marcus Ryker series or the twisty and shifty David Shirazi series.

Want to explore Venice, past and current?

Rob Samborn’s Painted Souls series delves into a past life love affair with plenty of art and swashbuckling action.

Are you a fan of hard-core geopolitical military thrillers?

Andrews & Wilson’s *Collateral* was prescient in its description of what’s going on in Ukraine right now.

Then there’s LA.

It’s rather like a foreign land. If you want character growth, wry humor, and a Zen perspective with your vigilante hero, give Gregg Hurwitz and his Orphan X series a read. Although based in the City of Angels, his last novel skipped into Mexico.

Speaking of south of the border...

Don Winslow’s Power of the Dog cartel series is a dark and memorable look at drug cartels.

Those of you who like to see women kicking ass around the world...

...should check out Katherine Neville’s fantastic and original The Eight series. Gayle Lynds’ Liz Sansborough or The Judd Ryder series helped break glass ceilings for women in the genre. You might also like KJ Howe’s Thea Paris series starring a kidnap and ransom specialist, Tori Eldrige’s Lily Wong series about a Chinese-Norwegian modern-day ninja, and JF Penn’s Arkane series featuring an Oxford University psychologist with a deadly past. Barry Eisler also has the Livia Lone series and Tumlinson has Alex Kayne, a female fugitive with the ultimate digital skeleton key.

A fan favorite for atmosphere

is the Cemetery of Forgotten Books series by Carlos Ruiz Zafón. It’s set over several decades in the incredibly rich city of Barcelona.

These recommendations only scratch the surface. No matter the flavor, whether it be hard and fast military action, classic adventure, or smart thrillers, there’s an inexpensive escape waiting for you.

What a wonderful way to break out of the mundane and explore the world.



About the author

Avanti Centrae is an international bestselling author who blends intrigue, history, science, and mystery into nonstop action thrillers. She’s honored to have won nine literary awards, including seven for her critically acclaimed VanOps thriller series and two for her forthcoming novel, *Cleopatra’s Vendetta*. Avanti graduated from Purdue University and has spent time in a spectrum of professions, from raft guide to Silicon Valley IT executive. When not traveling the world or hiking in the Sierra mountains, she’s writing her next thriller in Northern California, helped by her family and distracted by her German shepherds. Read free chapters at VanOps.net.



Of Cats & Mice

BY SHANNON HOLLINGER

I swear I've been here before, while lost among the pages of a favorite book. Only, I'm not reading right now, and what stands to be gained (or lost) is significantly more important than an entertaining plot. Because one way or another, what happens today will change everything.

When I arrived, the iron gate was already opened. I steered between its metal bars and up the long, winding drive, catching glimpses of cyan sea between the trees that lined the way, beckoning me forward. The road led me round first one curve, then another, and another, until I began doubting myself. Maybe it was a dream, and the path would never end. I'd continue on and on without ever reaching my destination.

But then the drive opened up and a sprawling green lawn gave way to a terrace sloping down from a grand, sweeping mansion of grey stone perched on the very top of the craggy clifftop. Manderley in living color, a match so precise that one has to assume that this is the exact location Du Maurier had in mind for her nameless heroine.

I took my time getting out of the car, knowing that I didn't belong—not even in my wildest fantasies—in a place like this. Yet here I am, in my best skirt, worn and frayed along the bottom hem, but only noticeable if you look closely. My nails are clean but raggedy, and as I'm wishing that I'd at least run a nailfile over the rough edges before starting the long drive here, I notice a curtain twitch to the side of one of the mullioned windows.

Delaying no further, I gathered myself and hurried up the sloping terrace. My hostess opened the door before I could knock, leading the way to a drawing room, and now

I find myself in another dream, this one a scene that looks torn straight from the cover of a cozy mystery novel.

Edith Brocca—*the* Edith Brocca, reclusive heiress and possible keeper of unsolved mysteries—sits across from me in an antique armchair before a fire, a ball of fluff curled in her lap. I can't tell what kind of animal it is until it turns a yellow eye on me, deems me unworthy as only a cat can, and settles back asleep.

Edith runs a hand over the mass of white hair pinned elegantly atop her head as I turn on my tape recorder and slip it onto the table between us. When I wrote, after months of phone calls that simply rang and rang without being answered, I was amazed when she replied. Even more so when she agreed to talk. And when she extended the invitation for me to come here—to this fairytale palace—for an interview? Words can't describe it.

Yet here we are. Me with my questions. She with her answers. I hope.

"Yes, of course I remember Lorraine." Her voice wavers with age but is rich in the refined quality reserved for the uber wealthy. Leaning forward, she pours a cup of tea from a gold embossed pot and passes it to me on a saucer with palsied hands. "She was my best friend growing up. Her family sent you, I suppose."

I smile. I should probably correct her, but it's a harmless fib. The truth is, there's no one left in Loraine's family to question where she is anymore.

"Have you ever wondered what happened to her?" I ask.

I run a true crime website. What with podcasts and all that, I've hit upon a bit of a rough spot lately. Subscribers are down and sponsors are pulling their ads like politicians

change their votes. If things keep going like this, I might have to get a real job, which is not something that I feel life has prepared me well for. I figure solving a cold case or two might get my following back up. Who knows? Maybe I'll even try my hand at a book.

"My heavens no," she says, a withered hand rising to her chest. "I don't wonder at all."

I reach for my tea and take a sip.

"I already know."

I sputter and cough, trying not to spray my hostess with aspirated chamomile. Setting the cup back on the table, I say, "You know what happened to Loraine?"

"Well, of course, dear. She was my best friend, after all."

I'm shocked. Absolutely speechless. Is it possible that after all these years, with all the people who've investigated the case before me, from the police to the parade of private investigators who ran Loraine's family's bank accounts dry, that they all failed to question the one lady sitting in front of me? It takes me a moment to find my voice. It's hidden under the stacks of cash I imagine making off my website.

"Well?" I ask. My hands curl around the arms of the chair so I don't float out of my seat. "What happened?"

"I can't tell you." She shakes her head, her glasses sliding low on her nose. "You wouldn't understand."

"But. Um." I see all the money I was already counting swirling down the toilet drain. "Well. How do you know if you won't tell me?"

She fixes her eyes on me and tilts her head, looking like a fragile bird deciding whether or not to take flight. Her speckled hand strokes the cat. The sound of its purr rumbles like the engine of my ancient car right before it stalls at a stoplight. Finally, she breaks her silence.

"If you want to know, then I'm going to need to tell you the whole story, so it's put in the correct context."

Excitement surges through my system like a drug, heating my skin, quickening my pulse. My mouth goes dry, my tongue sticking for a second as I lick my lips. I feel like a kid about to be given ownership of a candy shop.

"Well, if you have the time, I'd love to hear it. We won't be inconveniencing anyone? A husband? Your children?"

"No, dear, I don't have any of those. Rest assured that we're quite alone here. There won't be any pesky interruptions."

Something in my expression must betray what I'm thinking. To be her age and to have no one—especially with all her money. How does that happen?

She eyes me down the bridge of her nose and over the rims of her glasses, making a clicking noise in the back of her throat. "It's not that I didn't have my share of opportunities." She evicts the cat with a soft push and struggles to her feet. Crossing to the mantle, she holds a gnarled finger out as she scans the photographs lined on the burlwood until she finds the one she wants.

She turns, handing me the silver framed picture. "That's me, on the right."

She's a curvy blond glamazon straight out of a movie from the forties, the black and white picture unable to hide the impish glint in her eyes, the life that lights her face from within, the brazen arrogance of her sensuous pout that clearly stated that she was a girl used to getting what she wants.

"Wow." It slips out before I can stop it.

"See. Told you. I could have gone the whole husband and barrel of brats route. I just didn't want to." She points a knotted finger at the other woman in the photo. "That's Loraine," she says. Hidden under her shoulder, lost in her shadow, is a chubby brunette, shy eyes cast down from the camera.

Taking the photo from me, she sets it back on the mantle.

"Jack took that picture." She selects another photograph and holds it so I can see. The man in the frame looks equally like an old film star, kind of like that guy in *To Catch A Thief*.

Replacing the portrait, she continues staring at it as she says, "If ever there was a man I would have married, it was him. I was too young then, of course. Jack was a bit older than us. He had just graduated law school that summer." She bends to pet the cat weaving between her feet. "His parents bought him a schooner to celebrate. We spent the entire summer sailing around the cape. Just the three of us. Me, Jack, and Loraine."

The cat rises on its hind legs, batting at her hand as she straightens. It gives me a hateful look, then spins, sauntering to the far side of the fireplace with its fluffy tail swishing high in the air. If actions were words, I know what



it's saying. But screw the cat. I'm so close to the truth I can smell the cobwebs and dust it's been hiding under.

"And that was the summer Lorraine went missing?" I ask.

"It was."

I bite my lip, not wanting to be indelicate, but I have to know, and I need her to say it now, while the tape is still fresh in the recorder.

"So, then. What *did* happen to Lorraine?"

"You weren't listening." She sighs deeply, strokes the face of the man in the photograph with a crooked finger before turning to face me. "You need to hear the whole story, so you understand why I did what I did. Why I've never come forward."

"Why me?"

"What do you mean?" Her face is a study in neutral, enigmatic like the sphinx.

"I can't be the first person to ask you about Loraine's disappearance. I mean, you *were* her best friend. So why me? Why now? What's changed?"

She lowers herself back into her chair, the cat immedia-

tely jumping up to take residence on her lap. "Oh, everything and nothing." She offers me a sad smile. "Maybe it's because I'm the only one left. If I don't tell someone soon, the secret dies with me. And I like you, I guess. You've got spunk."

If I do, it's news to me, but I'm not going to argue. Settling back in my seat, I make myself comfortable. "Well, I'm happy to listen to anything you're willing to tell me. I'm all ears."

"It was such a different world back then. No internet, no social media, even TV wasn't the distraction it is now. I feel sorry for you kids, I really do." She gives me the side-eye, like I'm responsible for all the world's changes, then shakes her head and glances away.

Caressing the cat, she says, "Everything was simpler back then. More innocent. You met a man, fell in love, and lived happily ever after."

I hate when old people talk about the past like things were really so much better back when you could die from a splinter. Painting their youth in some rosy glow, like taking the Titanic to get between continents was good

times. I want to point out that things obviously hadn't been that simple for her, but bite my tongue instead, afraid she'll clam up if I do.

As if she can hear my thoughts, her eyes dart to mine, lips pressed firmly together in a thin line. Then she gives a small chuckle. "Or you really set the tongues wagging and you didn't, like me." She tells me about the time she brought two dates with her to church and almost gave the pastor's wife a stroke.

She's taking this tale along the scenic route. I'm worried that the tape in my recorder will run out before we get to the good stuff. If I'm right, and I get the scoop on what really happened, I'll need the recording to back my story. I can't let her get too distracted.

"Wasn't there a storm the day Loraine disappeared?" I ask, steering the conversation back to why I'm here.

She nods. "There was. A nasty Nor'easter blew in."

I remember the glimpse of water I saw on the drive up, the waves beating dangerously against the base of the cliff on this fine, clear afternoon. I can only imagine what the sea would be like in bad weather, whitecaps angry and thrashing under charcoal skies.

"Did the three of you take the boat out that day?"

Her head ducks and she glances to the side guiltily, looking like a small child caught playing dress up in granny's clothing. "In the morning, yes. But just out on the shoals. We wouldn't have gone out far on a day like that."

"But didn't you tell the police that Jack went out by himself that day? And didn't *he* tell them that he came back early, before the storm broke?"

She looks up suddenly, catching me watching her. She studies me back, face expressionless. "Have you ever been in love?"

I shake my head.

"Well, it can make you do some crazy things."

"But if it was an accident..."

"Like I said, times were different back then. Everything was simpler, more black and white. Jack was a grown man. Our safety was his responsibility."

"Did you know he took a lie detector test? Maybe fifteen years ago. His answers all checked out fine."

She shrugs. "Maybe they didn't ask the right questions."

"I'm sure they asked him if he knew what happened to Lorraine."

"I don't know what to tell you about that, except that I

heard poor Jack suffered from dementia in his later years. Maybe he passed the test because he'd told himself the same story for so long that he believed it was true. Or maybe there was some other reason." Another shrug.

"But all these years ... shouldn't you have given her parents some closure?"

"What makes you so sure it was mine to give?" She gazes into the fire with a faraway look. Her eyelids droop like they're heavy with sleep. Just when I think I've lost her, they open wide and she turns to me, her hands clapping together. "Listen. I've got something to show you. Something that will help it all make sense." She pushes up from the chair, the cat springing from her lap.

"No, leave that there." Edith points to the tape recorder in my hand. "You won't need it."

Reluctantly, I leave it behind and follow as she hobbles to the grand staircase. The bones of her hand jut out against her skin like a webbed foot as she grabs the railing and pulls herself up. I stay several steps behind as she ascends like she's scaling Everest, slowly and with painstaking care. Gardenia and talcum powder scent her wake. The cat stays between us, giving me nasty looks over its shoulder to make sure I keep my distance.

"This house has been in my family for generations. The staircase was brought over in pieces from England during the early 19th century."

She's slightly breathless, her voice quavering in a way it hadn't before. At the landing she stops.

"Do you need to rest?" She turns, giving me a sharp look, and pushes her glasses up her nose. "Not at all. We're here."

"Here?"

"This is what I wanted to show you." She gestures behind me, toward a large picture window that looks out on the dusky blue waters of the cape beyond. "As you can see, I had a perfect view of what happened that day."

"But I thought you came back before the storm?"

"We did. But Jack took the boat back out."

"Where was Lorraine when that happened?"

If she heard it, she ignores my question, staring out the window with cloudy eyes. She frowns, chin trembling as if watching the events of that fateful day play out all over again.

"You know, some things you never get over."

I can only imagine what it would be like—to watch your best friend die.

"They say that time heals all wounds, but I've found that just isn't true."

Her eyes narrow, jaw clenching. The thin skin at the base of her neck bulges as she swallows hard. I'm a monster, a heinous monster, making this poor old lady relive what's probably the worst memory of her life.

The cat glares at me, agreeing.

Reaching out, I touch my fingers lightly to her arm. "It's okay if we need to stop."

"I can't. It's too late now. There's no turning back."

I nod, not believing my luck. If only my tape recorder wasn't downstairs. I glance over my shoulder, as if hoping to see the dutiful tool marching toward me.

"I wasn't invited," she says in a tone cold and hard like steel.

I face her in time to see a cloud of anger descend over her features.

"Seems that my boyfriend and best friend decided they wanted to spend some time alone. Together. Without me." Her hands curl into fists.

"Huh?" What if it wasn't an accident? I see my scoop getting bigger. Juicier. Who cares about being a monster? I'll buy some kid a pony or something for karma. This is going to be worth it.

"What did you see?"

Edith gulps. "Enough."

What must this poor woman have felt? To have not just seen her best friend die, but to have watched, helpless, as she was murdered? By the man she loved, no less.

"The police did a disservice, allowing Jack to go free. There was too much of an age difference. It was inappropriate." She sounds pissed, and I don't blame her.

"Then why did you cover for Jack all these years?"

"I didn't."

"But ... you lied for him. Said that he went out alone that day."

"No, I didn't." She crosses her arms as she says, "You've gotten your facts confused."

"But."

"No buts. I may be old, but my brain's still sharp as a whistle. *Jack* said he went out alone. All I did was confirm that he came back before the storm broke. Which he did."

"But he never brought Loraine back with him?"

"I didn't say that, either."

I draw a deep breath, trying to inhale some patience.

"Listen. Edith. What exactly *did* happen that day?"

"That's what I'm trying to show you."

"Show me?"

"Yes. Haven't I shown you the view, how I could see Jack and Loraine sailing alone together?"

"Yes, but."

"Well, that's exactly what I showed Loraine when they got back, and she came here looking for an alibi. Expecting me to cover for her. Can you imagine the nerve? That little harlot. She knew I liked him. That's when I showed her how steep the stairs are. See?"

"Wha—."

Edith smiles down at the body, broken and crumpled at the bottom of the stairs.

Bending to stroke the cat, she says, "Oh, my, Charles. It looks like we've caught ourselves another mouse."

Shannon Hollinger's short fiction has appeared in *Suspense Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*, among other publications. Her debut novel, the psychological thriller *Best Friends Forever*, will be released in January 2023 and is the first of a five-book deal with publisher Bookouture. To find out more, check out www.shannonhollinger.com.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WINTER



Dark Rivers to Cross
Lynne Reeves

Lena Blackwell is running from her traumatic past. Deciding she has no choice but to leave Boston to keep her two little boys safe, she bundles them into a friend’s car and heads for Canada.

Along the way she stops for a few nights of rest in an old cabin in the woods of a run-down fishing camp on the Penobscot River in northern

Maine. The owner, Irving Cooper (“Coops”), tells her to stay as long as she wants and kindly brings her food and supplies. Loving the beauty and serenity of the site, she decides to stay, and together with Coops transforms the old camp, building a new inn and refurbishing the cabins.

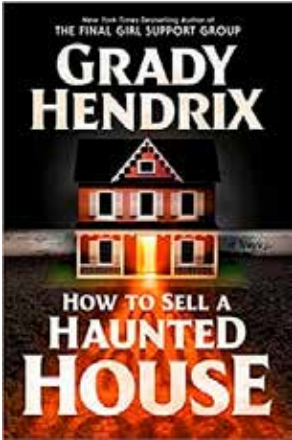
As her boys, Jonah and Luke, grow, they help Lena with the guests, learning how to manage the business and to love the river and the woods. However, the boys have very different natures. After high school graduation, nature lover Luke wants nothing more than to stay on the river, acting as

a tour guide taking the guests on hikes or canoeing. Meanwhile, Jonah longs for a life away from the lodge and goes to college to study film making.

After twenty peaceful years, Lena is hopeful that she and the boys are finally safe. However, wanting to find out more about his origins, Jonah decides to search for answers. He turns his search into a documentary for his final year college project. Lena had always told the boys they were adopted from a foster home, but refused to give them any details about their birth families. With Jonah determined to learn more, Luke reluctantly agrees to help him by snooping around in Lena’s office for clues, little suspecting that what Jonah discovers will endanger them all.

This riveting tale is told in dual time lines, gradually filling in the backstory as current events unfold. The writing is very atmospheric, with such a lovely sense of place that you can almost smell the fresh air tinged with the scent of the pines and hear the gurgle of the river flowing past. Recommended for those who enjoy a thriller that gradually ramps up the tension and sense of menace.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



How to Sell a Haunted House
Grady Hendrix

Why did their parents flee their home in the middle of the night? What had them in such a rush that they were killed instantly in a car crash? That’s what Louise and Mark Joyner want to know. The estranged siblings lost their parents in an instant, but nothing has prepared them for their next task—selling a haunted house.

Their mother had collected puppets, and the house is filled to the brim with the dolls of their childhood. Each sibling is harboring a dark secret about one puppet in particular—Pupkin. He led them through their childhood ... but now he has a life of his own? Going through the house, Pupkin comes alive in a new and terrifying way. He doesn’t want the house to sell, and Mark and Louise start to realize that the only way to break away from their past might be to burn it all down.

Hendrix has the uncanny ability to write horror in a funny and entertaining way. This story might make readers scared to sleep with the lights off, sick to their stomach, and laughing out loud all in the same few chapters. It is first and foremost a horror book, but the undercurrent of meaning behind the plot touches on how sometimes we feel like puppets, controlled by our childhoods. Our past can keep us safe, but it can also bind and suffocate us.

Memories are subjective, and nothing really is as simple as we think. For some readers, this book may exacerbate an already fragile fear of puppets and take it to a whole new level. While readers may find themselves wanting to look away from the book, they will simultaneously be obsessed with finishing each chapter. Fans of *The Southern Book Club’s Guide to Slaying Vampires* will fall in love with *How To Sell A Haunted House*.

Reviewed by Chelsea Hofmann



Blood Moon
Heather Graham & Jon Land

What would you get if you combined *The Terminator*, *I am Number 4*, and *Roswell*? Add a hefty dose of creativity and imagination, and it might look something like *The Rising* series—a collaboration from bestselling authors Heather Graham and Jon Land.

Blood Moon, the second in the series, takes an already high-octane thriller, pumps up the stakes, and sends our heroes, Alex and Sam, on a quest to save the world.

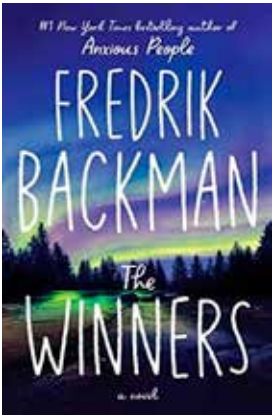
We pick up where book one left off—Alex now aware of his true heritage—and both he and Sam facing a dawning awareness of the scope of the foe they’re up against. And our authors build on everything they established in the first book, as well as introduce a chilling new threat from history—one that brings an element of the supernatural to this otherwise very science-fiction focused thriller.

I love when an author has fun with the plot when it comes to action thrillers, and it’s clear this was a collaboration that believes in entertainment alongside their high-tech high stakes.

The threats expand along with the stakes, and it’s not just invaders from alternate worlds that we’ll have to watch out for. As our heroes give their all in the name of keeping our Earth safe, other forces are at play much closer to home, and they’ll have to fight a battle on more than one front to make sure everyone makes it to the end of the book.

Blood Moon is a very entertaining read, one that will keep readers thoroughly entertained as the plot spools along, taking our heroes across the globe to face a variety of challenges. There’s a touch of romance—they’re teens, after all—but it’s only a touch, and it is deployed well to ease the throttle back just when needed. And though it absolutely leaves room for the next entry in the series, it’s a self-contained novel, something readers can appreciate. A very satisfying entry in a series that just keeps getting better.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook



The Winners
Fredrik Backman

Finally comes the third volume in Backman’s masterpiece involving “Beartown,” the anxiously awaited conclusion to the saga involving a trove of beloved characters, plus a host of new ones. It can still be enjoyed and devoured as a standalone due to Backman’s seamless interwoven backstory.

The novel begins with a storm tearing through the forests bordering the two competitive towns of Beartown and Hed. The squall causes chaos and deaths in both towns. Crazy and wild Ana drives her drunk father’s truck through insurmountable obstacles to help a midwife from Hed (Hannah) save a woman who is giving birth in a stuck vehicle. In the aftermath, the death of one individual will have far-reaching effects on both towns. It also will bring back home two of our main characters, Maya Andersson and Benji Ovich.

Maya was a victim of rape by Kevin Erdahl, a hockey star for the Beartown club. She bore the wrath of the town. How dare she accuse the star of their beloved team?

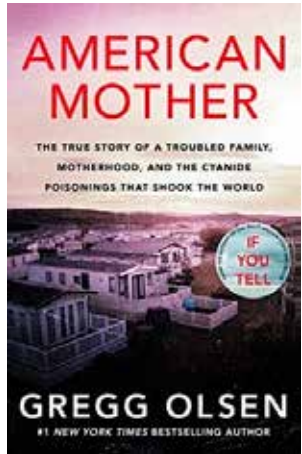
Benji was the best friend of both Kevin and Maya, the team’s enforcer who protected Kevin on the ice. His life was

left in turmoil once the town became aware that he was gay. Independently, both Maya and Benji left Beartown. Maya left to pursue her life’s passion at music college, while Benji left for Asia to pursue drugs and alcohol, in a setting devoid of hockey. They both return in respect for the death of Ramona—barkeeper and owner of the Bearskin Pub. Their presence will alter the dynamics of the rival towns, which encompasses not only the hockey clubs, but also the social and economic fabric. Tensions flare and grow, even resulting in fights involving the neighboring spectators attending the junior hockey game.

Central to the story is not only the importance of community, but moreso the overwhelming need for family and friendship. One of the most important new characters is Alicia, a seven-year-old abused girl from a poor, broken family. She possesses an extreme degree of talent and desire to play hockey. She will be nurtured by returning characters Sune, the retired hockey coach, and Peter, the team’s previous general manager (and former team player, and NHL player).

Fredrik Backman masterfully weaves a multi-layered, complex story with multiple converging plot lines that escalate in tension and intrigue and culminate in a heart rendering denouement.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



American Mother

Gregg Olsen

American Mother is a re-release of the 20-year-old true crime novel *Bitter Almonds*. It details the 1986 murders of Bruce Nickell and Sue Snow, who unknowingly took cyanide-laced pain relievers. This is Gregg Olsen at his finest, an extensively researched novel about the victims, who were strangers, and the mother-daughter duo who helped plan the murders.

Stella Nickell was tired of her husband sitting at home doing nothing every night. After all, their marriage was based on a love of partying and drinking. So when Bruce Nickell got sober and didn't want to go to bars, Stella got bored. Instead of asking for a divorce, she takes a trip to the local market and purchases some Excedrin and Anacin bottles, takes some capsules out to fill with foxglove seeds and cyanide from an algae killer, and puts them back on the shelf so it would seem like an epidemic. When Bruce reaches for some Excedrin for a headache, he dies almost instantly after ingesting the cap-

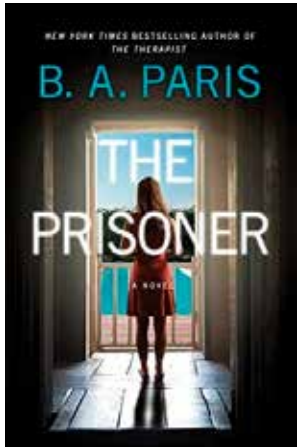
sules. Sue Snow, a stranger to the Nickells, purchases one of those bottles and dies before she leaves the house.

In his author's note, Olsen explains that there have been many updates to this case over the years, including the fact that he has located the Nickells' daughter, Cindy, who had been hiding for years. Whether or not readers are familiar with the crime, this book offers a fresh take, including significant updates on some of the main characters. It describes in detail the relationship between Stella and Cindy, and where it went wrong.

Friends and family of the Nickells divide into two groups: those who believe Stella is capable of murder and those who don't. Unfortunately for Stella, her own daughter turns her into the FBI. A good portion of the book is their relationship and how it crumbles.

Olsen writes as if he is telling the story to an old friend, and despite most of the characters being awful, they are relatable. He describes their homes, clothes, and landscapes in such a way as if we were there. What could have been a laborious police procedural turns into a fantastic depiction of a true crime.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



The Prisoner

B.A. Paris

The Prisoner is based on a very intriguing premise. When an impoverished young woman agrees to marry a very wealthy man, both of them see it as the means to an end. However, after only being married for a few days, they are both abducted and held prisoner.

After losing her mother as a young child and her father from cancer when she was six-

teen, Amelie Lamont moved to London to find work and save enough money to complete her education. However, once her summer job in a restaurant has ended, she finds herself unemployed and homeless. Amelie is rescued by Carolyn Blakely, who offers her a room in her house and a job as her housekeeper for as long as she wants to stay.

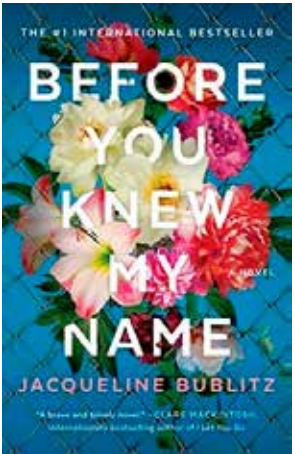
Gradually, Amelie makes a new life for herself, meeting friends of Carolyn's who work for a magazine that features interviews of the movers and shakers and celebrities of the day. Eventually, Amelie also lands a job at the magazine working for the owner, Ned Hawthorpe, son of a billionaire philanthropist.

When Ned unexpectedly asks Amelie to accompany him to Las Vegas, where he has an interview lined up, she is excited to be invited along. However, it turns out that Ned has a business proposition that should be mutually beneficial. She finds it hard to turn down. Unfortunately, she has no idea of the man Ned really is. It's not long until she finds out. But before she can figure out how to get out of their arrangement, they are abducted.

Written in short, sharp chapters, the novel starts strong and at a good pace. The mystery of the abduction makes for compelling reading. Amelie and Ned are kept in complete darkness in separate rooms, and although Amelie never sees the kidnappers, she is treated well by them.

The pace slows as the kidnappers wait for Ned's father to decide to pay a ransom. Although young and naïve, Amelie has lived through tough times and is portrayed as a survivor, intelligent and willing to fight for her freedom. Readers of B.A. Paris will enjoy the overall premise and Amelie's story.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



Before You Knew My Name

Jacqueline Bublitz

Jacqueline Bublitz's debut novel is heartbreaking and thought-provoking. At thirty-six, Ruby Jones moves to New York City from Australia. She needs to be shaken out of her current state of aloneness and get a fresh start on life.

Alice Lee turns eighteen on the day she arrives in New York with six hundred dollars, a few clothes, and a stolen camera. One month later, Alice is dead, but her story continues. When Ruby finds a woman's body by the Hudson River, she and Alice are connected. While Ruby wants to forget what she saw, she can't. Can she solve Alice's death and give her closure?

The complex characterization is first-rate for Alice and Ruby as well as for many of the secondary characters. Their hope, sadness, and loneliness are palpable. Both characters change and grow as they respond to events.

This novel is unique with its narration by Alice after her death. For the majority of the book, others know her only

as Jane Doe or Riverside Jane. The story goes beyond who murdered "Jane" to who was "Jane." Readers learn from Alice about her life before her death, including her month in New York. They also gain insight into Ruby's desire for a change in her life.

This book has a solid premise and a mystery, but it's much more than that. There's a focus on the victim and the one who found her more than the murder itself. It's about the ability for all to walk safely on streets. Taking control of your life and the effects of trauma on those who encounter it are explored, including flashbacks, paranoia, and hypervigilance. It's about finding a murder victim and having a young life full of opportunity cut short. News coverage bias and remembering the victims is explored.

Overall, this story is gripping, thought-provoking, and emotional, with wonderful characterization and many scenes of heartache and hope. While this is fictional, violence and murder against women is an occurrence that is all too frequent in today's world. Readers will be eager to dive into more from this new author. This incredible novel will be remembered for a long time.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Something Bad Wrong

Eryk Pruitt

This novel chronicles the investigation of an unsolved double murder of a young couple found bound to a tree in the woods in early 1972.

The young couple disappeared on Christmas Eve of 1971 from South Carolina and were later found by a surveyor across the state line in Deaton County, North Carolina.

The novel opens with a preface of a modern-day true-crime podcast created by Jess Keeler and then further tells the story with dual timelines of the present day and 1972 investigation. The story is then propelled forward by the points of view of the different characters in alternating chapters.

Leading the investigation of 1972 is sheriff's deputy Big Jim Ballard, who also happens to be the long-dead grandfather of podcaster Jess. Big Jim is supervised by Sheriff Red Carter. Both are larger-than-life local legends, each willing to resort to any method necessary to find answers.

For fifty years the killings have gone unsolved with no new information coming to light, until Jess discovers an old

spiral notebook belonging to her grandfather. The notebook not only contains previously unknown information, but also the name of a man her grandfather highlighted as "guilty."

Jess then approaches Dan Decker, a disgraced, womanizing, but once very well-known journalist, to help in her investigation, and after considerable encouragement is able to persuade him to help.

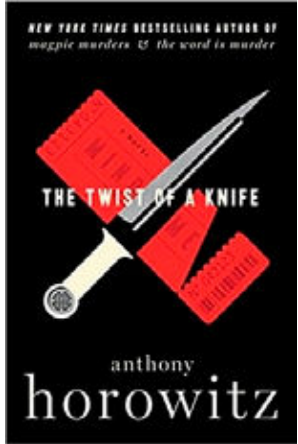
With the charm of Decker, the pair find more people willing to reveal more information, while others seem to wish the past stayed in the past. One of those resistant to the overtures of Jess and Dan is the sister of the murdered woman.

Not only does Eryk Pruitt put forward an interesting present-day telling, but also a complex recounting of the original investigation with interesting revelations best left to the discovery of the reader.

The writing is crisp and wonderfully descriptive, with the story reading like a crime fiction epic. *Something Bad Wrong* is also a blending of the genre styles of country/rural noir and a police procedural. It is also written in such a way that Southern films set in the 1970s like *I Walk The Line* and *In the Heat of the Night* are brought to mind.

Something Bad Wrong is set to be released in early 2023.

Reviewed by Eric Ellis



The Twist of a Knife

Anthony Horowitz

Anthony Horowitz’s crime series featuring a semi-fictional version of himself alongside fictional ex-detective Daniel Hawthorne continues to be a lot of fun. In this fourth episode, Horowitz’s contract to write three books featuring Hawthorne’s PI investigations has been completed and he has told Hawthorne he doesn’t want to do any more.

Apart from the fact that Hawthorne treats him like an idiot and never tells him what’s going on as he drags him along in his wake interviewing witnesses and suspects, Horowitz is also busy with a play about to open in London. Called *Mind-game*, it’s a twisted murder mystery set in a lunatic asylum. It has been doing well in a number of regional theaters and now is set to open at the Vaudeville theatre in London’s West End.

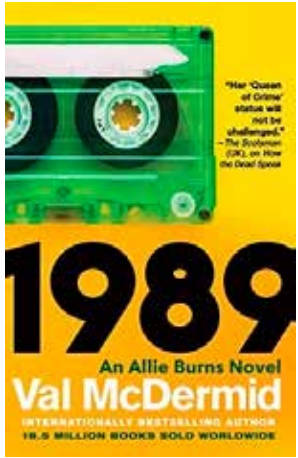
On the opening night of the play, it seemed to be well received by the audience and well attended by the theatre critics from all the major newspapers. The Director gave Horowitz and the cast an unusual opening night gift in the form of a replica dagger from his last play, *Macbeth*, and threw an opening night party for them. While having a few

last drinks at theatre before going home, one of the cast received a link to a review of the play by one of the top critics, savagely disparaging Horowitz and most of the cast. The next morning the critic is found murdered in her home, stabbed in the heart with Anthony’s *Macbeth* replica dagger.

Later that day, Anthony is arrested and questioned by DI Cara Grunshaw, a detective he has an unfortunate history with from his investigations with Hawthorne. When he is released on bail while the police await DNA evidence, he turns to the only man who can help him prove his innocence—Hawthorne.

Told with Horowitz’s trademark self-deprecating humor, this is an excellent addition to the series. The reader knows Horowitz is innocent, but with evidence mounting up, can Hawthorne prove it in time and find the real culprit? Or will Horowitz end up behind bars? As usual, Hawthorne plays his cards close to his chest and keeps Horowitz one step behind him during his investigation. Along the way, Horowitz breaks through Hawthorne’s intense privacy to learn a few more tantalizing facts about his past as a police detective, suggesting a future intriguing story with a focus on Hawthorne is set to unfold in a later addition to the series. With a very Christie-esque vibe and Poirot style dénouement, this is a very lively and engaging whodunnit.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



1989

Val McDermid

There are some incredible things that happened in 1989: the first *Simpsons* episode aired, Tim Berners-Lee created the world wide web, the Berlin wall came down, and The Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. In 1989, McDermid creates a vivid sense of memory through events, music, and technological references (a cell phone the size of a suitcase!).

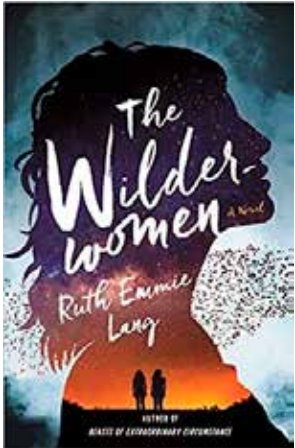
In Scotland’s outer Hebrides, poison has been placed in the vitamin capsules of Wallace “Ace” Lockhart, a maligned media baron. This is not revisited until the last few gripping chapters.

Journalist Alison “Allie” Burns is covering the aftermath of the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, and then the Hillsborough stadium disaster in Sheffield. Though trained as an investigative journalist, the newspaper she has been working for has been taken over by Ace Lockhart, and now she is expected to cover fluff pieces and nothing that requires too much thought.

One very important news story in 1989 was the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which was running rampant across the gay community all over the world. Particularly in the conservative UK, the epidemic has raised judgemental attitudes, but also is increasingly pressuring health services. After Allie falls on a story about AIDS in Edinburgh, she discovers that a drug trial that aims at stopping the effects of HIV has been stopped abruptly and moved to East Germany. She needs to head behind the Iron Curtain to write the story that she hopes will boost her out of fluff and back into investigative reporting. To get to East Berlin, she is persuaded into a plan to allow her source’s girlfriend to use her passport to get back into Manchester. At the same time, Ace Lockhart’s daughter Genevieve is also in Berlin and gets into her own trouble. Allie is called upon to rescue her, bringing everything to a climax.

This is the second novel in the Allie Burns series, but readers who have not read the first book (1979) will have no trouble following along. There are powerful themes, such as AIDS and what was very real bias against homosexuals in that year and area. McDermid addresses these in detail while weaving genuine history through a fictional story.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



The Wilderwomen

Ruth Emmie Lang

Ruth Emmie Lang takes readers as well as her main characters, Zadie and Finn Wilder, on a journey in *The Wilderwomen*. Their mother, Nora, disappeared five years ago. Why did she leave them? Where is she? Is she even alive?

Why didn’t Zadie see it coming? After all, she is a psychic. Finn’s ability is to get echoes of other people’s memories that have been left behind. At her graduation party, Finn gets a particularly strong echo that she realizes belongs to Nora. Finn convinces Zadie to use their beach vacation time to unravel the mystery. They plan to use her echoes to retrace Nora’s travels and find her. However, this is easier said than done.

While Zadie and Finn are likeable characters and well developed, they each have flaws that would seem to make them feel realistic. Zadie feels alone and abandoned. Finn was placed in foster care and they gradually have become

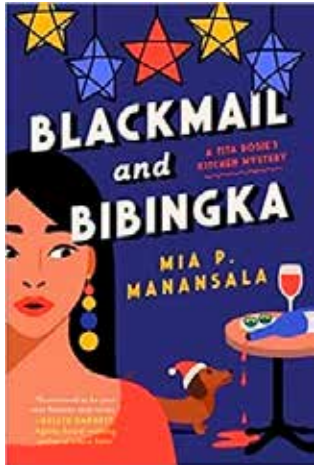
more and more distant as the years passed. She was wrapped up in her new life and turned down invitations to meet with Zadie. Both go through transformations as events unfold, but Zadie has the most dynamic changes.

The story is atmospheric and somewhat sad with some stressful and suspenseful moments. There are several twists and turns. Readers will feel like they are on a road trip with the sisters. The rhythm and cadence of the writing is somewhat lyrical and uses strong visuals.

Magical realism, great dialogue, a mother’s disappearance, an unforgettable journey, and sisters reconnecting combine to make this novel unique and enjoyable. The characters the girls meet on their journey add another layer to the story. There are heartwarming moments that will draw readers into the story even more. The ending wraps everything up nicely. However, it has some surprises that readers may not expect. Themes explored include family, sisterhood, guilt, being different, anger, forgiveness, and mending broken relationships.

Overall, this story is fascinating, thought-provoking, and emotional, with great world-building.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Blackmail and Bibingka

Mia P. Manansala

Author Mia P. Manansala has infused her latest book with diverse characters, a death, an amateur sleuth, and some suspense.

There’s a focus on food, family, and friends. This cozy mystery features Lila Macapagal, owner of the Brew-ha Café with her friends and business partners Adeena Awan and Elena Torres. The story is set in Shady Palms,

Illinois, and takes place near Christmastime. It’s the third book in the Tita Rosie’s Kitchen Mystery series.

As the Brew-ha Café and the family restaurant, Tita Rosie’s Kitchen, prepare for the town’s winter bash as well as their own holiday celebrations, Lila’s cousin and Tita Rosie’s son, Ronnie, returns to town after fifteen years. He and his business partners have bought the old Shady Grove Winery and plan to operate it. However, Ronnie has always meant trouble. When a death occurs and Ronnie is one of the murder suspects, Lila goes into sleuth mode for her family’s

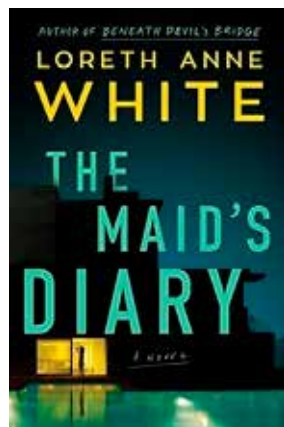
sake and starts investigating.

This novel features characters with a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as those of different faiths. Lila’s family comes from the Philippines, and a handy glossary is included at the beginning of the book to help cover the many Filipino foods and terms. At the end of the book are several recipes for dishes mentioned. The characterization is well done. Readers get well-developed main and reoccurring characters, as well as secondary and tertiary characters. For readers who enjoy cute dogs that like to dress up, Longganisa (Nisa) and Poe will steal your heart.

This book has a solid plot with some twists and turns; it is creative and will keep readers guessing. Family, friendship, starting over, secrets, jealousy, romances, helping others, and food are at the heart of this story. While it’s descriptive, the pace doesn’t slow. There are references to previous cases that Lila has been involved in, but there aren’t any details, so there don’t seem to be any spoilers if one reads this book first. However, readers may still prefer reading the series in order.

Those who enjoy cozy mysteries with diverse characters, great food, and a subplot of budding romances will likely enjoy this book.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



The Maid's Diary

Loreth Anne White

An adulterous midnight rendezvous in a car parked in a secluded area turns into more than the two occupants bargained for when they observe an odd occurrence that appears to be the disposing of a body.

The witnesses are prominent professionals married to other people. Neither can afford to be forthcoming with what they observed, for obvious reasons. They silently agree to go their separate ways without reporting what they saw.

The Maid's Diary is a complex thriller in which someone's carefully buried past comes roaring back to haunt them when it's discovered by Kit Darling. Kit has made a career of cleaning wealthy clients' homes, affording her abundant opportunities to indulge her obsessive fantasies by snooping through their personal belongings, taking photos of herself with said items and posting the misleading pictures to her secret social media account. She dreams big and lives large through her fantasies, believing them to be harmless fun.

However, what she discovers at her newest client's house

not only shocks her, it scares her to death, sending her spiraling back to a dark time in her life. Should she speak up? Go to the police? Or is there a way Kit might benefit from her newfound knowledge? She records everything in her secret diary as her therapist advised before deciding on a course of action that propels this tension-laden story forward.

A dark, intense, and convoluted tale ensues—one that eventually involves homicide cop Mallory Van Alst and a gruesome, bloody scene at the home of a missing wealthy couple whose maid is also missing. The blood evidence at the scene indicates someone died there, but who? Where is the body?

Loreth Anne White is a master at rendering taut, twisted stories that grip readers from page one until the end. *The Maid's Diary* is a dark, gritty story in which White introduces seemingly unconnected characters with vastly different lifestyles and pasts and meticulously entangles them within intricate plot threads. White's signature style of igniting setting and tone builds tension to the flash point before it all detonates in an explosive climax.

Readers, find some quiet alone time to settle in with this one because you won't stop reading until you've turned the final page.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover

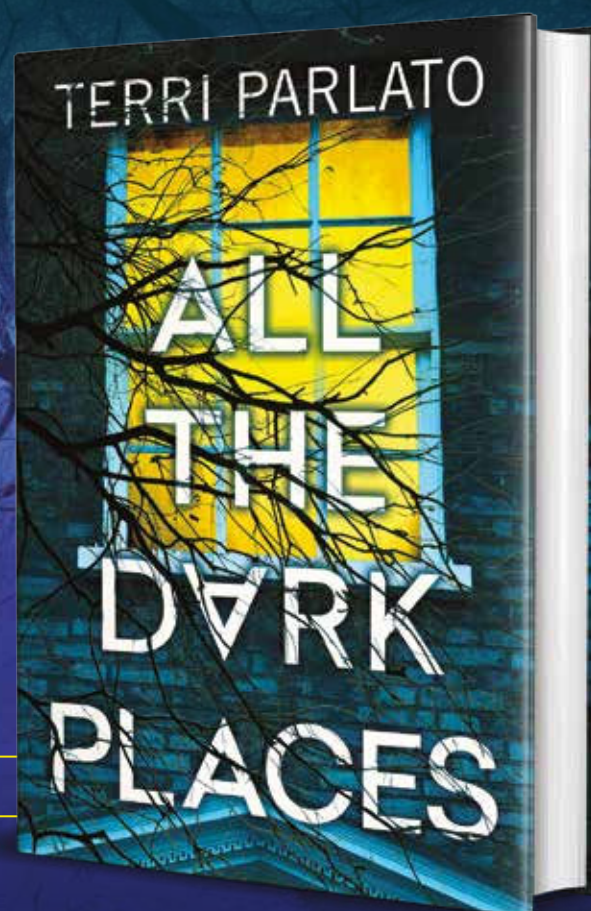
"Perfectly crafted...A **moody, atmospheric thriller** with just enough **clues** to keep you **hopelessly addicted**."

—CHARLIE DONLEA, *USA Today* bestselling author

A **modern whodunit** about a **savage murder**, a woman with a **traumatic past**, and a **group of friends** all with **secrets to hide**...

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