

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE



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MAGAZINE

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The machine, busting the
space-time continuum,
and immortality

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Novels Adapted for Film**
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**Author Q&As: Stacy Willingham,
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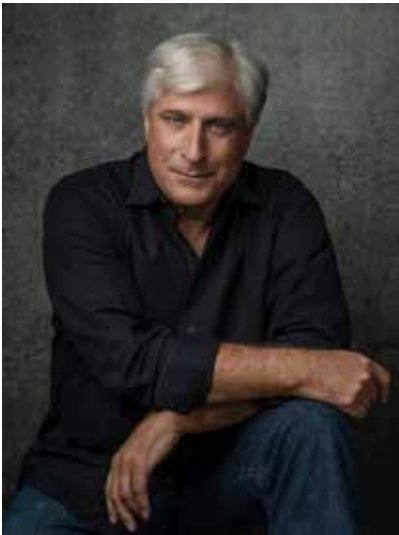
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EDITOR'S COLUMN

A new year of suspense-provoking titles are ready for your spring reading.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

Spring is a big season for fiction. Publishers are launching new lineups. Readers have sloughed off their winter habits and are diving into a new year, and the new books that come with it. A feeling of renewal is in the air. Here at *Mystery & Suspense*, we feel the same energy. It's on every page of the thrillers, crime, mystery, horror, and suspense we're reading, and hopefully on every page of this month's issue as well. We've got a great ensemble of features for you. Everything from time travel to games in thrillers to the locations of murder. We've also got an all-star cast of interviews: Stacy Willingham, Steve Berry, Grady Hendrix, and David Baldacci, all here to tell you about their latest titles, as well as a bit more about themselves. To bring it home, you can read what we're reading. Spine-tingling, sweat-inducing, suspense-provoking novels that are at the top of our lists, and should be on yours as well. And finally, you'll love “Auction Night,” a short story mystery that will have you scratching your head until the end.

Happy reading,
Sam

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Stacy Willingham
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Stacy Willingham

Stacy Willingham is the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and internationally bestselling author of *A Flicker in the Dark* and *All the Dangerous Things*.

She earned her BA in magazine journalism from the University of Georgia and MFA in writing from the Savannah College of Art and Design. Before turning to fiction, she was a copywriter and brand strategist for various marketing agencies. Her books are being translated in more than thirty languages.

She lives in Charleston, South Carolina, with her husband, Britt, and Labradoodle, Mako, where she is always working on her next book.

Q. *All the Dangerous Things* is the follow-up to your hugely successful *A Flicker in the Dark*. What does this story bring to the table?

Stacy: *All the Dangerous Things* tells the story of a sleep-deprived mother trying to find her missing child. It explores womanhood and motherhood, as well as the true crime craze and the murky morality associated with consuming that kind of content. There is also a heavy element of sleep psychology present in the book: it discusses both insomnia and sleepwalking, connecting the theme of extreme exhaustion with our main character, Isabelle’s, days of early motherhood when the sleepless nights seemed to pile up. Finally, Isabelle has a tragic history that is just as much a part of her everyday existence as her quest to find her son, which really asks readers to consider how past experiences inevitably color our future realities.

Q. *All the Dangerous Things* focuses on Isabelle Drake. Who is she? What’s in her past?

Stacy: Isabelle Drake is a young mother who wakes up one morning to find herself living in her own worst nightmare: her toddler son Mason has disappeared out of his nursery in the middle of the night while she was asleep in the next room. Like any mother, she dedicates her life to trying to find him—but after an entire year of little evidence and no leads, the case quickly goes cold and Isabelle develops a severe case of insomnia as a result. Not only does her lack of sleep lead to all kinds of problems like paranoia and confusion, but it also churns up unsettling recollections of her past, including a mysterious tragedy that struck her childhood home, leaving her questioning her own memories and mind.

Q. You’re a Southerner yourself, and set *A Flicker in the Dark* in Louisiana. What is the setting for *All the Dangerous Things*?

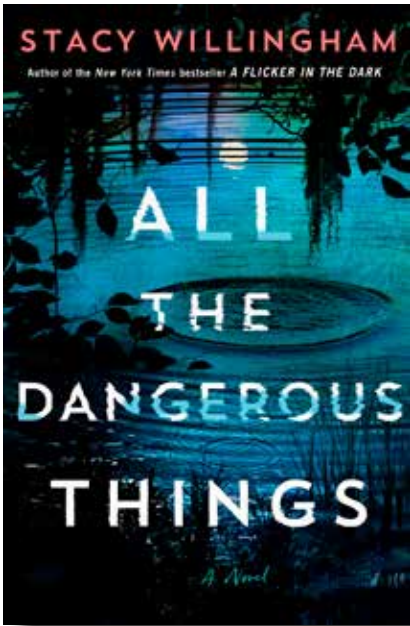
Stacy: *All the Dangerous Things* is set in Savannah, Georgia and Beaufort, South Carolina. I am a Southerner, and because of that, I just really enjoy describing Southern settings. The little things I notice every day like the sounds of various insects or even just the feel of the air feels incredibly distinctive, but at the same time, each little pocket of the South is unique, and no two places are quite the same. With that said, the Louisiana setting in *A Flicker in the Dark* feels very different from the Georgia and South Carolina settings of *All the Dangerous Things*.

For this particular novel, I chose Savannah and Beaufort for a variety of reasons. I love the Southern gothic feel of the cities with their giant live oaks and wrought iron gates and dripping Spanish moss, but the largest purpose was because

Savannah is known to be one of the most haunted cities in the country. There are graveyards scattered across the city, stories of death hovering over hotels and restaurants, and because Isabelle herself is so haunted by what happened in her past as well as her missing child, I thought putting her in a city that was also haunted would amplify those feelings to a suffocating degree.

Q. What are you working on next?

Stacy: I’m working on my third novel right now, another psychological thriller set to be published in 2024. It’s my take on a dark academia story, so it’s quite different than what I’ve published in the past—lots of characters, and of course as college students, they’re all much younger than the characters in *A Flicker in the Dark* and *All the Dangerous Things*, which means they have different backstories, insecurities, and motivations I’m having a lot of fun exploring. I’m excited about it!



Stacy Willingham’s latest:
All the Dangerous Things

One year ago, Isabelle Drake’s life changed forever: her toddler son, Mason, was taken out of his crib in the middle of the night while she and her husband were asleep in the next room. With little evidence and few leads for the police to chase, the case quickly went cold. However, Isabelle cannot rest until Mason is returned to her—literally.

Except for the occasional catnap or small blackout where she loses track of time, she hasn’t slept in a year.

Isabelle’s entire existence now revolves around finding him, but she knows she can’t go on this way forever. In hopes of jarring loose a new witness or buried clue, she agrees to be interviewed by a true-crime podcaster—but his interest in Isabelle’s past makes her nervous. His incessant questioning paired with her severe insomnia has brought up uncomfortable memories from her own childhood, making Isabelle start to doubt her recollection of the night of Mason’s disappearance, as well as second-guess who she can trust ... including herself. But she is determined to figure out the truth no matter where it leads.

The Game Trope: A Winning Story- Telling Technique

CORTNEY DONELSON

Puzzles. Riddles. Code-breaking. Stories with games in play are a sure way to capture readers' attention. But it's about more than the game—it's just as much about the players.

As readers, the language of writing can sometimes get sticky. Who cares what a hyperbole is? What does it matter if that -ing verb is a gerund or a present participle? And what do those things even mean?

As fiction readers, though, we understand themes ... and even if we don't know it, we understand tropes. We get what's required for a murder mystery (*I see dead people*) or a romance (*You complete me*). In thrillers, specifically, we sense the threads being pulled through the story—the ones drawing us closer and closer to the climax as we await the ultimate suspense or surprise: the heart-thumping action scene that drowns out the reality around us or the plot twist that causes us to drop the book into our laps and stare at the wall. These threads are the tropes.

Tropes have gotten a bad reputation because they can be mistaken for clichés and other figurative language strategies, such as metaphors. While clichés—overused or predictable phrases—should be avoided because they show a lack of creativity, tropes are tools writers use to enhance a story. But again, who cares about those fancy word-nerd issues? That stuff is for the school teachers and editors, the grammarists.

For our purposes, we might think of tropes as the foundational elements of storytelling. They help set (and hopefully fulfill) the expectations we readers have for a particular genre. Readers want suspense and intrigue in thrillers, right? Of course we do. Tropes are those common situations or entities that help structure the thrillers we love to read.

Thriller authors choose from a variety of tropes to meet our expectations. To list a few examples, there's the isolated setting—think Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. Or there is the high-IQ psychopath or the seductively sinful female, commonly called the femme fatale. Often in thrillers, authors use the deadline trope. Pick any legal, crime, or spy thriller, and you'll see what I mean. Three ... two ... one! BOOM!

One of the most intriguing tropes authors might use in their novels is the game. This trope is easy to spot in movies. In *The Game* with Michael Douglas or the comedic thriller (isn't that an oxymoron?) *Game Night* with Jason Bateman, the writers pit their characters in literal games to navigate the plot. In books, the game trope can be subtle or—like in these movies that use the word game in their titles—overt (e.g., *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline).

Games come in many forms. There are literal uses, as with weaving classic board games (like *Clue*!) or puzzles, riddles, and code-breaking into the storyline. Perhaps the most suspenseful, though, are the psychological games, where authors twist “play” into something more sinister, coaxing an emotional outpouring from readers. Like an eel slithering through murky water, psychological games play (pun always intended!) with not only the protagonists' minds, but with readers' minds, too. When there are games in thrillers, something we saw as innocent in our youth can become dreadful, confusing, even evil. Suddenly, the safety from our childhood is gone, and we're left fighting an inner emotional battle. What was once good (game-playing) is now bad (mental and emotional torment). But is it really bad? The conflict continues because we seek out these thrillers; after all, the entertainment factor still stands firm. Even war can be positioned as a game trope—think strategy games, like chess or battleship.

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Perhaps the most suspenseful use of the game trope is the psychological game, where the author twists “play” into something more sinister, coaxing an emotional outpouring from readers.

It's not just the game and its solution that make the best novels worth reading. Equally compelling are the relationships and interactions of the characters and the unique worlds in which they live, both of which animate the games and bring them to life. Inside relationships is where most psychological games occur. Trust becomes betrayal; love becomes addiction, and life dies.

Finally, the art of the hunt in the thriller novel caps the game trope. Whether killers are hunting their next victims, detectives are hunting for clues, saviors are hunting for morals, or readers are hunting for satisfying conclusions, the hunt wraps suspense like a gift, packaged for eager readers of the thriller genre.

When done skillfully, the game trope will make us reach for our favorite thrillers over and over again. First to be entertained. Then to uncover the early hints the author may have left to the games' solutions, which we missed the first time around.

Here are a few examples of books that use the game trope:

- The Clue series, an eighteen-book children's series published throughout the 1990s (based on the board game Clue)
- The Hunger Games series by Suzanne Collins (twisted sport/games for survival)

- *The DaVinci Code* by Robert Langdon (code-breaking)
- *The Guest List* by Lucy Foley (a puzzle)
- *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk (combat, pseudo-sport)
- *Forfeit*, by Dick Francis (horse racing)
- *The Silence of the Lambs* by Robert Harris (the ultimate psychological game)
- *Midnight in the Bright Ideas Bookstore* by Matthew Sullivan (code-breaking)
- *The Games* by James Patterson and Mark Sullivan (the Olympic games)
- The Inheritance Games young adult series by Jennifer Lynn Barnes (riddles and puzzles)

Whether you understand when to use “who” or “whom” in a sentence, we can all appreciate how the game trope in thrillers only enhances the suspense, keeping us continually seeking to experience the newest and greatest psychological game or strategic maneuver as we cozy up with our favorite hot beverage. But not too hot. You know, in case the twist or drama makes us want to chuck something across the room or jump under our “blankies.”



About the author

Cortney Donelson owns vocem LLC, a writing services business that offers ghostwriting and editing to writers with ideas and stories that will change the world. She has three books with her name on them: a memoir, a faith-based book, and her debut novel, a mystery inspired by Monopoly and called *The Billionaire's List*. She lives in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area with her family and when not writing or editing, enjoys paddle boarding and hiking. Learn more at yourvocem.com.

Location, Location, Location

Mysteries have their place. Landing on the moon? That could have been a fun location for a murder. The Egyptian Pyramids, Eiffel Tower, or White House? They would be great locations for a good murder. In fact, they have been.

BY MARCIA ROSEN

Major cities, small towns, and many made-up villages have become the location for a murder mystery and, especially, several very successful mystery series. There were plenty of murders in cities along Rt. 66. John Steinbeck named it the Mother Road. I think of it as the Murder Road.

Location was once considered everything in business ... before technology. Location is still essential in a good mystery. Location is place, and place is as much a character in mysteries as the people.

Murder on the Orient Express—what a great location for a murder, moving and stopped. As was the apartment in *Rear Window*, and another apartment in the haunting film, *Laura*. In and around London there were many murders with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson and a fascinating one on an English country estate in Godsford Park.

We lovers of mysteries know that murders and other crimes have occurred on all sorts of moving vehicles, in different rooms in small homes and large estates, and possibly even in our own back yards? Well, hopefully not!

The lover of mystery books enjoys envisioning the place where a story takes them, and in movies and on television the place often becomes central to the appeal and importance of the story. It helps the viewer to become caught up in it, perhaps even feel a part of it. Some plots are dark and frightening and provide an extra sense of anticipation for lovers of thrillers like the type written by Stephen King, and his locations add to the suspense.

The art of a murder mystery and investigation includes a private detective or the police or, in a cozy mystery, an amateur sleuth. The dialogue needs to create suspense with some foreshadowing, and fake clues are followed and soon ignored. Finally, the arc of the murder mystery starts having the story lead to the chase of the real villains, who are caught—dead or alive—of course.

But, what about a location, where murder and mayhem terrorize the residents? Doors are locked and there are whispers and secrets behind those closed doors. Questions remain. Who killed their neighbor’s wife in the alley next to the post office? Who stabbed the

old man as he walked across the bridge late at night? Who pushed the young man off his apartment balcony? Why did the murderer run his or her car over the victim on a country road, the moon hidden behind the trees? Were there witnesses to any of these murders? Ah, where are they possibly located?

As a mystery writer, I believe location plays a huge part in the plot and ultimately when and where the murder is solved. To escape, murderers hide in a location fitting the plot, one designed to build up a sense of suspense and anticipation.

We as readers and viewers also enjoy explosive endings. There are gunfights and car chases up and down city streets. There are threats and demands until the final moments of capture. The movie *Witness* ended in an Amish barn. In the book *The Name of the Rose*, written by one of my favorite authors, Umberto Eco, the murders and the ending take place in an abbey in the 1300s. In Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, the finale is on Mt. Rushmore. Another favorite of mine is Sue Grafton’s Alphabet Series, taking place somewhere along the California coast. And, in historical fiction, the landscape fits the century and the plot.

Location, location, location. The book ends. The film is finished. Surely calm prevails, the dark sky is lighter, and all is right again. Or is it?

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The lover of mystery books enjoys envisioning the place where a story takes them, and in movies and on television the place often becomes central to the appeal and importance of the story.



About the author

Marcia Rosen (aka M. Glenda Rosen) is the award-winning author of eleven books, including the Senior Sleuths and Dying To Be Beautiful mystery series and *The Gourmet Gangster: Mysteries and Menus* (menus by her son Jory Rosen). She is also author of *The Woman’s Business Therapist* and *My Memoir Workbook*. For twenty-five years she was the owner of a successful national marketing and public relations agency. Marcia is a member of numerous writing organizations and frequent guest speaker.



David Baldacci
New York Times bestselling author
davidbaldacci.com

David Baldacci

David Baldacci has been writing since childhood, when his mother gave him a lined notebook in which to write down his stories. (Much later, when David thanked her for being the spark that ignited his writing career, she revealed that she’d given him the notebook to keep him quiet, “because every mom needs a break now and then.”)

David published his first novel, *Absolute Power*, in 1996. The feature film adaptation followed, with Clint Eastwood as its director and star. In total, David has published forty-seven novels for adults; all have been national and international best-sellers, and several have been adapted for film and television. His novels are published in over forty-five languages and in more than eighty countries, with 150 million copies sold worldwide. David has also published seven novels for young readers.

Q. Readers are in for another treat with *Simply Lies*, a straight-to-the-bloodstream thriller featuring former New Jersey detective, Mickey Gibson. Who is Mickey? How does her suburban, single-mom life change in an instant?

David: Mickey Gibson is a tough former cop turned internet sleuth and a single mom. She is fine with her new life, because it allows her to be at home with her two little kids, but she does miss the adrenaline rush of being on the street hunting criminals. Her suburban life is blown to hell when she receives a phone call one morning from someone calling herself Arlene Robinson. As soon as Gibson acts on the request in that phone call, her life will never be the same. She has to go from supermom to supercop in the blink of an eye. But, of course, she can never really stop being a mother. Her opponent is one quirky, capable lady too. Together, they make a memorable pairing.

Q. What drew you to Mickey’s story? What was the inspiration behind it?

David: My wife had me listen to a crime podcast a while back about a con being run on Hollywood film workers—makeup, wardrobe, location scouts—that took them to Indonesia. One of the people on the podcast they employed to help solve the case hunted folks and assets online. That was intriguing enough for me to create Gibson’s backstory. And let that be a lesson to us all—you never know where a story idea is going to come from. Lift your eyes from your totally addictive electronic device and actually watch the world and its inhabitants for a bit. You will never be without story ideas.

Q. Famously, your first novel, *Absolute Power*, took three years to write, two weeks to find an agent, and two days to sell. How has the writing process changed for you? What are your habits and routines?

David: I’m scared with every new book that I can’t bring the magic again, but that’s okay because fear is a great antidote to complacency. I write most days, no page count or word goals. I write until the tank is empty. I don’t outline the book but let it grow organically. There is an urgency with writing in the trenches instead of looking at an outline you wrote months ago to tell you how the story is going to go,

before you even spend one page with your characters. I love to print out the full manuscript and then bloody it with my pens. I think best in cursive! And marginalia and inspired thought is where that blob of clay comes alive to go forth as a real book.

Q. What are you reading these days?

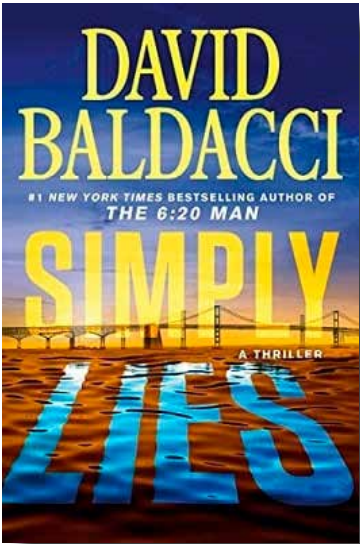
David: I’m reading *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle*, the new biography by Jon Meacham, as well as the new biography on Agatha Christie by Lucy Worsley. My sister gave me *Killers of a Certain Age* by Deanna Raybourn, which I’m looking forward to diving into.

Q. Is *Simply Lies* the start of a series, or a standalone? Are we going to see Mickey again?

David: Mickey and her new partner will be back! They’re too good for a one-and-done. When you find magic, you need to let it out of the bottle for others to enjoy.

Q. What’s next?

David: A sequel to *The 6:20 Man* and two works of historical fiction. What? Historical fiction did you say? Yes. Stay tuned.



David Baldacci’s latest: *Simply Lies*

Mickey Gibson, single mother and former detective, leads a hectic life similar to that of many moms: juggling the demands of her two small children with the tasks of her job working remotely for ProEye, a global investigation company that hunts down wealthy tax and credit cheats.

When Mickey gets a call from a colleague named Arlene Robinson, she thinks nothing of Arlene’s unusual request for her to go inventory the vacant home of an arms dealer who cheated ProEye’s clients and fled. That is, until she arrives at the mansion to discover a dead body in a secret room—and that nothing is as it seems.

Not only does the arms dealer not exist, but the murder victim turns out to be Harry Langhorne, a man with mob ties who used to be in Witness Protection. What’s more, no one named Arlene Robinson works at ProEye.

In the blink of an eye, Gibson has become a prime suspect in a murder investigation—and now her job is also on the line until she proves that she was set up. Before long, Gibson is locked in a battle of wits with a brilliant woman with no name, a hidden past, and unknown motives—whose end game is as mysterious as it is deadly.

Time Travel Elements

The machine, busting the space-time continuum, and immortality

JOHN HOPKINS

Futuristic visionaries weave complex time-traveling tales across a broad spectrum of sci-fi sub-genres for books, television, and movies in which the characters rewrite history, thwart apocalyptic scenarios, correct injustices, or, in Bill and Ted's case, go on a comical lark.

These imaginative authors unlock a Pandora's boxload of consequential changes and unforeseen implications by employing fantastical leaps to cheat the system, shift the paradigm, and bend the curve to send their characters surfing through space and time. For audiences, the inevitable result is a brain-melting link chart stringing what-if scenarios to narrative dilemmas large enough to drive a monster truck through. On the bright side, since the concept of time travel happens primarily within the realm of sci-fi and fantasy, fans accept heaping doses of creative license and turn a blind eye to all but the most egregious narrative lapses.

Until time travel becomes a reality, the sky is the limit for creative minds to transport their characters through time. Yet, three components remain elemental to most time-travel stories: a machine or mechanism, busting the space-time continuum, and the paradoxical concept of immortality inherent in mastering the fourth dimension, otherwise known as time.

THE MACHINE

Anything from portals, gadgets, appliances, devices, and vehicles—even an entire island—can break the bonds of space and time. H.G. Wells’ Time Traveller built his magnificent machine using brass, ivory, and other weighty and luxurious materials. His creation even had a plush seat, because you may as well travel in comfort. *The Time Machine* remains one of the most literal time-traveling devices ever invented. A thing of beauty that staggered those fortunate few invited by the scientist to bask in his brilliance. We’ll leave the Morlocks and the Eloi for another time.

Fast-forwarding to the contemporary audiences’ gravitational tendency toward more accessible, less exotic modes of transport, storytellers employ a variety of everyday items to achieve time travel. Any examination of time travel would be incomplete without mentioning the iconic DeLorean in *Back to the Future* and its incomprehensible yet plausible flux capacitor powered by a plutonium reactor. As Doc Brown tells Marty in a hilarious opening scene, “When this baby hits 88 miles per hour, you are gonna see some serious shit.”

Going from the high tech to the low tech, on the hit show *Lost*, a routine flight from Sydney to Los Angeles is way-laid by a mysterious island. The stranded crash survivors are left to grapple with parallel universes and time-tripping narrative arcs that conclude after six seasons with a convoluted but satisfying series finale. The modus operandi for unte-thering the island from time? A frozen donkey wheel unleashes a pocket of electromagnetic energy from the heart of the island when Benjamin Linus turns the wheel, and it slips off its axis.

Not to be outdone and proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that anything can work as a time travel machine if the audience buys into it, *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure* utilizes a phone booth. The witless duo travels back in time to pass their history test with the likes of Abe Lincoln and Genghis Khan along for the ride. Excellent!

BUSTING THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM

The age-old expression “If you break it, you buy it,” holds especially true for travelers encountering multifarious fates through space and time.

In a quintessential original *Star Trek* episode titled “The City on the Edge of Forever,” an overdosed, half-crazed Dr. McCoy travels through a time portal called the Guardian of Forever to 1930s New York City. Kirk and Spock follow in hot pursuit. In typical *Star Trek* fashion, Kirk falls in love with Joan Collins’ character, but discovers he must let her die to reset the history McCoy altered so the future can be restored. Written by Harlan Ellison, the tragic episode won numerous awards and remains a classic example of how one act can irrevocably change the future.

Another excellent illustration of time travel ramifications comes from none other than Homer J. Simpson. In the classic *Simpsons* Treehouse of Horror vignette “Time and Punishment,” Homer fixes a toaster with a spent nuclear fuel rod and accidentally turns the common kitchen appliance into a time machine. Transported back to a time “when dinosaurs weren’t just confined to zoos,” Homer remembers Grampa Simpson’s words of wisdom, “If you ever travel back in time, don’t step on anything. Because even the tiniest change can alter the future in ways you can’t imagine.” Homer fails to heed his father’s sage advice—a comedic domino effect ensues. Eventually, Homer returns to a world that looks like home but discovers his family eating with reptilian tongues, leading the weary donut-loving traveler to mutter, “Close enough.”

Perhaps no films stand as a better testament to overcoming the noise, confusion, and clutter associated with time travel in all its manifestations than James Cameron’s first two Terminator movies. In *The Terminator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger is a humorless automaton dispatched backward in time by future robots on a relentless mission to kill Sarah Connor, whose future son, John, is destined to become humanity’s savior. That is as complicated as it gets. Though integral to the script, the scenes depicting traveling through time are almost an afterthought, minus Arnold’s chiseled form poised in a bodybuilder’s pose on a trash-strewn smoldering macadam. The *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* sequel flips the script with Arnold returning in a similar naked style, but this time on the side of the angels. A transformed Linda Hamilton’s badass Sarah Connor steals



the show, realizing what needs to happen to change the future and stave off the apocalypse before time runs out. Both films’ laser-like focus on an edge-of-your-seat, protracted chase scene filled with carnage and mayhem leaves no time to navel-gaze the vagaries of time travel to which the enthralled audiences said, “I’ll be back.”

THE IMMORTALITY PARADOX

While time travel is waiting to be discovered, used, and, no doubt, commercialized to the nth degree, enriching its founding purveyors with unimaginable wealth and glory,

immortality awaits those who dare to shed the constraints of time and ride the cosmic waves.

In Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*, a team of astronauts led by Matthew McConaughey and Anne Hathaway is dispatched through a wormhole near Saturn to check out planetary replacements for an Earth on the brink of devastation. Taking liberties with Einstein’s Special Relativity, which states that the greater the acceleration, the slower an object—like a spaceship—moves through time, Nolan packs the film with heady nods to physics and loads of mind-bending philosophical implications complete with an interdimen-

sional library. In a poignant final scene, a youthful-looking 124-year-old McConaughey reunites with his daughter, now an old woman at death's door, for the first time since leaving behind her 10-year-old version on their dusty farmhouse front porch to venture across the universe.

It is no surprise that the master of the techno-thriller, Michael Crichton, devoted his immense talents to time travel, writing the novel *Timeline*. After inventing top-secret quantum technology that reduces people to a sub-atomic level and rebuilds them at a pre-determined point on the historical timeline, an ethically challenged corporation convinces a group of young archeologists to travel back to 14th-century France to rescue their colleague. With plenty of culture shock and gruesome deaths at the hands of the surprisingly sophisticated denizens of the year 1357, the hook to immortality lies in the crumbled vestiges of past civilizations, stark reminders that while we are mortal, time marches inexorably forward.

Speaking of crumbled vestiges, nothing surpasses the shock awaiting Charlton Heston's Taylor in the 1968 classic *Planet of the Apes*. Before settling in for a long sleep in the movie's prologue, aboard a ship traveling near light speed, Heston muses to anyone who may be listening, "Time bends. Space is boundless. It squashes a man's ego. I feel lonely. That's about it." Awakening to claxons as the crashed ship sinks in the middle of a deep blue lake amid a vast desert, he

notes the year 3978 before deserting the shipwreck with his fellow surviving crewmen. Unfazed and ready to take their place at the top of the local food chain, the bearded, rugged trio venture forth with all the hubris and swagger that comes with outliving everybody and everything they once knew and held dear. Two-thousand years old and still going strong, even after his mates succumb to the sharp-edged scalpels of the apes' experimentation, Taylor has his infamous revelatory moment on the lapping shore of an oddly familiar sea. Indeed, his immortality came at the burdensome price of being the only human survivor of a former world.

OUT OF TIME

Venturing backward or forward in time is a familiar plot device across a spectrum of classic science fiction and fantasy. Iconic authors in the veins of H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Harlan Ellison, and Michael Crichton to silver screen heavyweights like Robert Zemeckis, Christopher Nolan, and James Cameron, to namedrop just a few, provide entertaining glimpses into the limitless potential of time travel. Through a diversity of ingenious machinations that bust through space and time and lead to immortality, their creations continue to captivate and excite our imaginations while conjuring more questions than answers.

Check the time. You are in a future world from when you started to read this article. I know, right?



About the author

Author and artist **John Hopkins'** passion for science fiction and curiosity for what lies beyond common knowledge shape his character-driven storytelling. While active in his career in communication arts, John followed his muse, creating *Lost Cactus*, a comic strip set on a top-secret research base akin to Area 51. The three-panel strip's supernatural mythology evolved into a shared universe of short stories, sowing the seeds for his The Powers That Be trilogy. Books One and Two, *The Golden Ellipse* and *The Lost Ship*, are out now. Book Three, *The Blue Spark*, is set for late 2023.

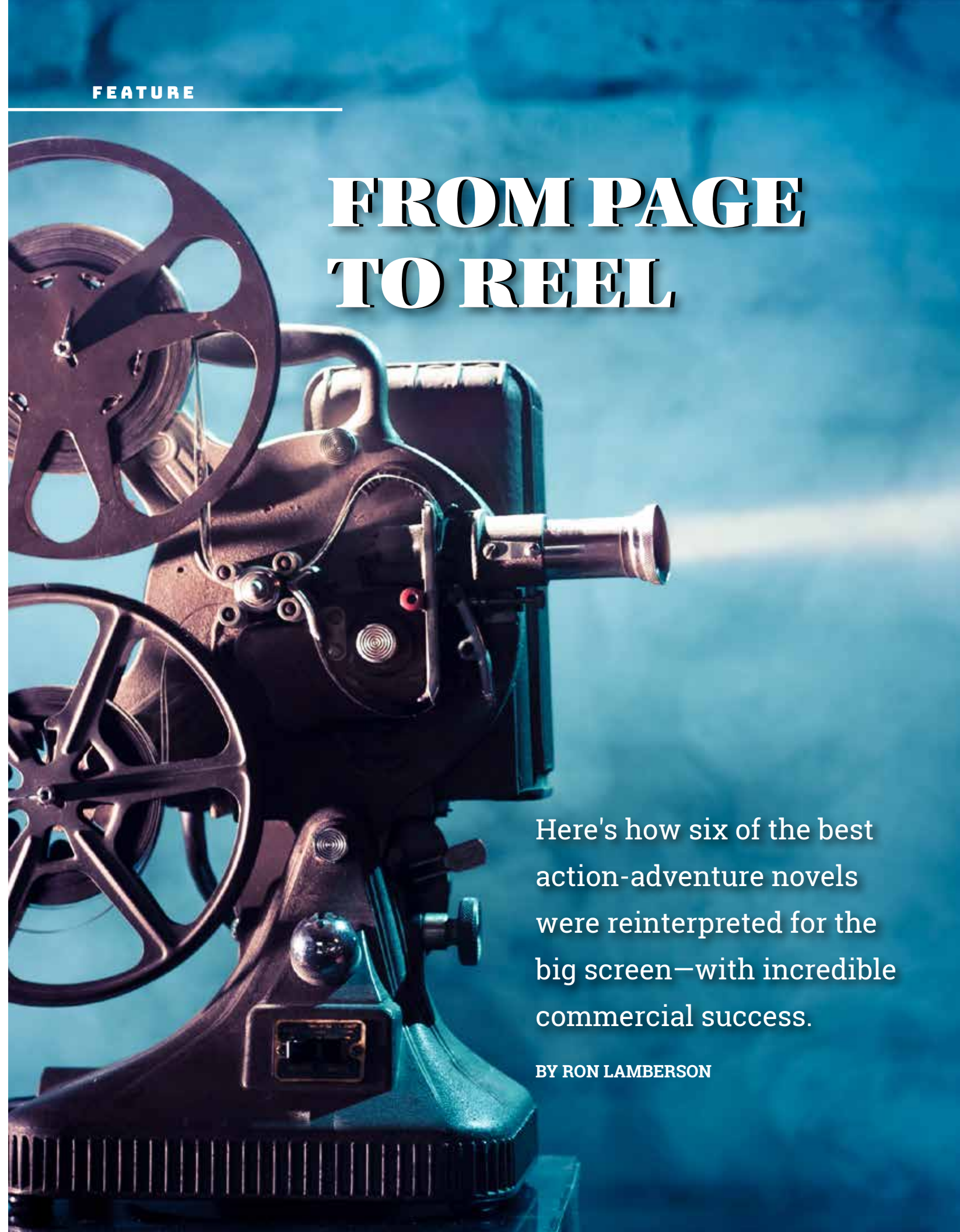
Discover more at johnhopkinsauthor.com

FEATURE

FROM PAGE TO REEL

Here's how six of the best action-adventure novels were reinterpreted for the big screen—with incredible commercial success.

BY RON LAMBERSON



Of the countless “can’t win” scenarios in the art world, reimagining a novel as a feature film might be the worst. The film’s creative team is not only saddled with the impossible task of condensing three to four hundred pages of content into two hours of compelling screen time, they also must somehow mirror the imaginations of many of the book’s readers.

For the sizable population who possess a deep passion for books and film, finding an accurate and fulfilling film adaptation of a beloved novel is a rarity. “The book was better” almost always seems to be the prevailing assessment of the finished picture. There are, however, certain literary genres that fare better throughout the transition process, and action-adventure frequently achieves a higher rate of success. Perhaps this is simply because writing action scenes is more difficult than producing them on screen.

First, a word about determining genre. Just because the Everything Store has decided to surgically subdivide books into 8,000+ micro-genres, it doesn’t mean we have to do the same. Even at the highest levels, the lines regularly blur between genres. For this list, I’ve attempted to set aside fantasy (*The Hobbit*) and science fiction (*Star Wars*, *Dune*) hybrids and focus on tales based in the real world.

THE BOURNE IDENTITY

One of the most financially successful adaptations, including book and theater ticket sales, was Robert Ludlum’s *The Bourne Identity*. I still remember discovering this faceless protagonist scrambling to recover his life amid a world of chaos during my freshman year of college. While Matt Damon is far from “faceless,” he fully embodied the everyman that Ludlum created.

Is the film true to the source material? Maybe not, but Doug Limon’s transformation of the tale is a whirlwind blast. Bouncing from emblematic city to city, dodging a steady barrage of vehicles, ammunition, and weaponry, Damon’s Bourne convinces us that we’ve fallen into the novel itself.

FIRST BLOOD

Author David Morrell dreamed up John Rambo in the early 1970s in his novel, *First Blood*. A decade later, Sylvester Stallone stepped into Rambo’s boots to establish his second cinematic franchise. Stallone’s Rambo in this opening entry echoes his nuanced portrayal of underdog Rocky Balboa. There’s more emotion, tension, and depth in this initial translation than in the following sequels. Yet the film and the

novel offer a gripping, fast-paced race as Rambo attempts to evade his traumatic past and the military brethren focused on keeping him down.

JAWS

Stephen Spielberg’s *Jaws* hit theaters in the summer of 1975, frightening millions of viewers—including this writer—away from the beaches for years. Peter Benchley’s novel, published a year before the film’s release, provides a deep examination of the main characters’ lives while sustaining the impending doom of the shark’s presence.

The film, which admittedly teeters between the edges of horror and action/adventure, is essentially a safari at sea, led by one of the most memorable cinematic seamen, Captain Quint. While Spielberg’s adaptation understandably shed some of the novel’s peripheral storylines, the final product is a relentless series of tension-laden set pieces.

THE LOST CITY OF Z

Non-fiction books most often find new homes as documentaries. Acclaimed writer/director James Gray, however, chose to adapt David Grann’s award-winning account of Percy Fawcett’s relentless pursuit of *The Lost City of Z* into a fascinating expedition film. Adventure at its purest—harrowing, emotional, and true—Gray’s version deftly links Fawcett’s relentless pursuit and the Amazon’s constant threat. A great cast—led by *Sons of Anarchy*’s Charlie Hunnum and the seemingly ubiquitous Robert Pattinson—and stunning cinematography combine for a thought-provoking cousin to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Gray’s interpretation of Fawcett’s real-life sacrifice and diligence is an underappreciated achievement.

JURASSIC PARK

Michael Crichton’s canon weaves through science fiction, social commentary, history, technology, and medical thrillers and almost always delivers a satisfying read. Only the best can write a 500+ page-turner. Film adaptations of his novels are a mixed bag. The most notable interpretations, which arguably cheat on the sci-fi side, are *Jurassic Park* and its sequel, *The Lost World*. Like *Jaws*, the films are terrifying explorations of survival.

Crichton and Spielberg’s flair for clearly actualizing the threat of technologies hidden just beyond our horizon is spellbinding. The wonder of the novel’s resurrection of the T. Rex is masterfully transformed into the bone-rattling stomp we feel in the theater.



DIE HARD

Bruce Willis’s turn as downtrodden John McClane was originally conceived by author Roderick Thorp’s *Nothing Lasts Forever*—a nice trivia night nugget. Director John McTiernan’s blockbuster release elevated McClane to a household name, and while the novel struggles to live up to McTiernan’s pacing and Willis’s embodiment of McClane, it provides an interesting counterpart for one of our more surprising Christmas films.

Readers and viewers will continue harboring their own valid—and likely passionate—opinions on what qualifies as action and adventure. The cross-pollination of the purest forms of adventure with fantasy, science fiction, political thrillers, and standard drama allows for a continual flow of tantalizing novels and—we always hope—loyal, remarkable film reinterpretations.



About the author

Ron Lamberson is a freelance writer and novelist who has published three novels, including *A Grave Invitation* and *The Poachers of Immortality*. He holds a BA in Creative Writing from Purdue and an MBA from Indiana University. Ron is a passionate traveler, having visited over twenty countries on five continents. He spends his free time struggling to learn guitar, attending concerts, and avoiding injury on the tennis court. Learn at ronlamberson.com.



Grady Hendrix
New York Times bestselling author
gradyhendrix.com

Grady Hendrix

Grady Hendrix writes fiction, also called “lies,” and he writes non-fiction, which people sometimes accidentally pay him for. He is the author of *Horrorstör*, the only novel about a haunted Scandinavian furniture store you’ll ever need. It has been translated into fourteen languages and is being turned into a movie from the people who made quality films like *1917* and *Black Swan*. Foolishly, they are paying Grady to write it. He is busy inserting a whole lot of tutus into it right now.

Q. What are some of your favorite themes of horror? Are any of them present in *How to Sell a Haunted House*?

Grady: Like a lot of people who love this kind of depravity, I don’t read horror to be scared, although that’s a nice bonus. I read horror because it’s my safe space. Nothing makes me feel more comfortable than a black cat arching its back on a tombstone or a deserted country road lined with abandoned houses where you can hear things creeping around in the basements. I wrote *How to Sell a Haunted House* during the pandemic, when we were all isolated and trapped in our own houses, and I wanted to write something that made me feel less lonely. I missed my family and so I decided to write a haunted house novel because haunted house stories are always about families: their secrets, their curses, and what they leave behind.

Q. You’ve said elsewhere that, growing up, you weren’t allowed to watch R-rated movies. What was your relationship with the horror genre as a kid? How did that impact your writing?

Grady: I wasn’t actually much of a horror fan when I was a kid because the covers of the books freaked me out too much. So it’s weird that I wrote a book (*Paperbacks from Hell*) about those exact covers! When I was young, I mostly read sci-fi, men’s adventure, and military fiction. My horror exposure came, the way it comes for a lot of people, by watching horror movies with my friends. On my birthday I got to invite a bunch of people over to spend the night out in the garage and we’d watch one horror movie after

another. Pretty soon we were doing it even when it wasn’t anyone’s birthday. So my connection to horror was that it was social, it was fun, and it was something best experienced with friends.

Q. Have you ever been inside a house you considered haunted?

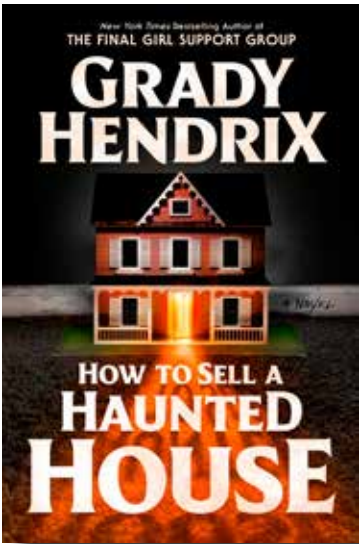
Grady: For many years I worked for a parapsychological research organization and while I’ve never personally been in a house people considered haunted, I’ve talked to lots of people who have. What’s funny is that real-life haunting experiences tend to sound pretty anticlimactic to the outside listener. Supernatural experiences have a huge emotional impact on the people experiencing them, but when they describe the experience it’s usually not very action packed: you see someone walk across a room that was supposed to be empty, doors or cabinets open or close on their own, you hear footsteps overhead when no one else is home. It’s a bit like telling someone your dreams: they mean a lot to you, but as you relate them you realize that the person you’re talking to is not totally overwhelmed. For researchers, these kind of experiences are invaluable datasets, but they aren’t going to turn your hair white. Fictional haunted houses, on the other hand, they’re a non-stop shower of blood, buckets of flies, and screaming ghosts jumping out of the freezer.

Q. Two of your recent titles, *The Southern Book Club’s Guide to Slaying Vampires* and *The Final Girl Support Group* were breakout successes. How have these enormous accomplishments affected your writing, expectations, or process?

Grady: I’m incredibly grateful to readers who embraced those books, and I’m really psyched to get out on the road with the new book, doing my show, and meeting all these people. It’s been too long since I got to do that! (Thanks, pandemic.) But I just keep my head down and keep on writing because it’s what I love to do. The only change in my stupid, backwards, probably deeply inefficient process is that I don’t want to disappoint anyone (child of divorce) so I keep trying to level up my game.

Q. What’s next?

Grady: I’m currently finishing the screenplay for a feature film based on my first book, *Horrorstör*, about a haunted IKEA, and I’m also working on my new novel for 2024. And I’m bringing back my podcast, “Super Scary Haunted Home-school,” in early 2023. I love podcasting but it is a lot of work if you want to deliver something awesome, so I’m really excited to be back in the saddle. Some of the episodes I’ve done are among my favorite projects I’m completed.



Grady Hendrix’s latest:
How to Sell a Haunted House

When Louise finds out her parents have died, she dreads going home. She doesn’t want to leave her daughter with her ex and fly to Charleston. She doesn’t want to deal with her family home, stuffed to the rafters with the remnants of her father’s academic career and her mother’s lifelong obsession with puppets and dolls. She doesn’t want to learn how to live without the two people who knew and loved her best in the world.

Most of all, she doesn’t want to deal with her brother, Mark, who never left their hometown, gets fired from one job after another, and resents her success. Unfortunately, she’ll need his help to get the house ready for sale because it’ll take more than some new paint on the walls and clearing out a lifetime of memories to get this place on the market.

But some houses don’t want to be sold, and their home has other plans for both of them...



Between Neighbors

From the timeworn village to the modern homeowner association, small communities are a cozy setting for familiarity, contempt, and even murder.

BY LINDA LOVELY

In literature, the notion that “familiarity breeds contempt” can be traced back to Chaucer in the 1300s. The phrase suggests that, by gaining intimate knowledge of a person or group, you risk discovering unseemly warts that might otherwise stay hidden.

In today’s common-interest community associations—whether condo or homeowner associations (HOAs)—property owners are practically guaranteed to become quite “familiar” with individual neighbors as well as the inevitable insider social and power cliques.

These modern communities have a centuries-old lineage. Their makeup is not all that different from the village of St. Mary Mead, home to Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple. As backdrops for novels, small, close-knit communities offer ripe possibilities for page-turning puzzlers. The residents know—or think they know—a great deal about one another, even if they’ve never spoken. That allows the neighborhood “village” gossip network, reliable or not, to provide a rich array of suspects for a crime novel.

DRAMA BY ASSOCIATION

Do many fans of crime fiction live in HOAs?

According to an October, 2022, statistical summary published by iPropertyManagement, some 74 million Americans own property in 355,000-plus HOAs. The summary adds that 53 percent of all U.S. homeowners live inside 40 million HOA residences. And the percentage appears to be growing. Twenty-two new HOA associations are created daily, while 82.4 percent of 2021’s newly-constructed homes sat inside HOAs.

Like almost every collective that brings humans together in close proximity, HOAs are natural incubators for conflict. People aren’t clones, even the ones who all want to live in an oceanfront condo or build a new home in a mountain retreat.

Some residents will champion stricter architectural and “appearance” rules that legislate everything from the number of minutes garage doors can stay open to when and what holiday decorations are permitted. Folks who object to such stringent regulations will argue they’re intrusive and

unreasonable—especially if said rules didn’t exist when they bought their property.

In neighborhoods boasting common-use facilities such as clubhouses, lobbyists may push for special assessments to finance pet projects, ranging from pickleball courts to fitness centers. This will irk folks who resent paying for add-ons they’ll never use.

In some developments, new owners may view covenants that restrict cutting trees on their land as overreach and a violation of their property rights. But, while these people see trees as view-blocking weeds, nature-loving residents across the street may be appalled at the loss of shade and wildlife habitat.

When cliques form around vastly different visions for neighborhood evolution, sympatico echo chambers reinforce grudges and slights, gossip passes for gospel, and opinions harden. As a consequence, opportunities for compromise grow dim and anger builds.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

In the privacy of their homes, people also cope with challenges and heartaches their neighbors never suspect—from mental health and financial crises to domestic abuse and grief for lost loved ones. These factors can intensify wrath toward neighbors, who have no idea what secret burdens folks down the street shoulder.

In most cases, when resentments lead people to lash out, the results are petty, non-violent provocations. For instance, a dog owner may walk his mutt after dark and urge it to poop on an enemy’s pristine lawn. Or someone ordered to remove a political flag may put an obscene poster inside a front picture window.

While HOA managers may occasionally mutter that “managing an HOA can be murder,” common-interest neighborhoods aren’t typically thought of as homicidal

settings. Yet, even wealthy, gated communities aren’t immune to deadly violence. The Community Associations Network has a sizeable online section devoted to “Violence in Associations.” In this section, violence reports range from the golf-cart vigilante shooting of a dog walker to an HOA president being choked by a neighbor with a flooded basement.

In August, 2022, the manager of an Atlanta condo owner’s association was murdered, and two more individuals were shot. The woman charged with the crime owned a condo in the condo association. In response to this tragedy, one community association management executive suggested HOAs were entering a “scary time” in which managers must expect to deal with “more crazy.”

THE DANGER OF SMALL CITIES

While news reports of violence often focus on big cities, an analysis undertaken by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics suggests some rural areas, suburbs, and small cities may actually be plagued with higher violence rates than high-density urban areas. However, since the study focused on National Crime Victimization Survey numbers between 2010 and 2015, it didn’t include homicides. (The survey interviewed crime victims, which, of course, excluded homicide victims.)

Another study that did look at homicides adds to the picture of violence beyond big city limits. In this study, a tally of gun homicides per capita from 2016 to 2020 found the two U.S. counties with the dubious honor of leading the nation were rural counties in Arkansas and Alabama.

Of course, for authors, setting a mystery series in a rural town, small city or a single HOA raises the specter of Cabot Cove syndrome—a ridiculously-high per capita homicide rate that would normally prompt residents to flee in droves. While the much-beloved TV series *Murder, She Wrote*

portrayed Cabot Cove as an idyllic hometown, viewers had to overlook the high death rate.

So, how can authors of crime-fiction series maneuver around town-limit confines? One path is exemplified by C.J. Box, whose hero Joe Pickett, a Wyoming game warden, is often called away to investigate crime in rural settings beyond his hometown.

For my HOA Mystery series, I gave the heroine, a retired Coast Guard investigator, a security consulting job with an HOA management firm with more than a dozen clients. That lets me spread my murder mayhem across multiple community associations in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

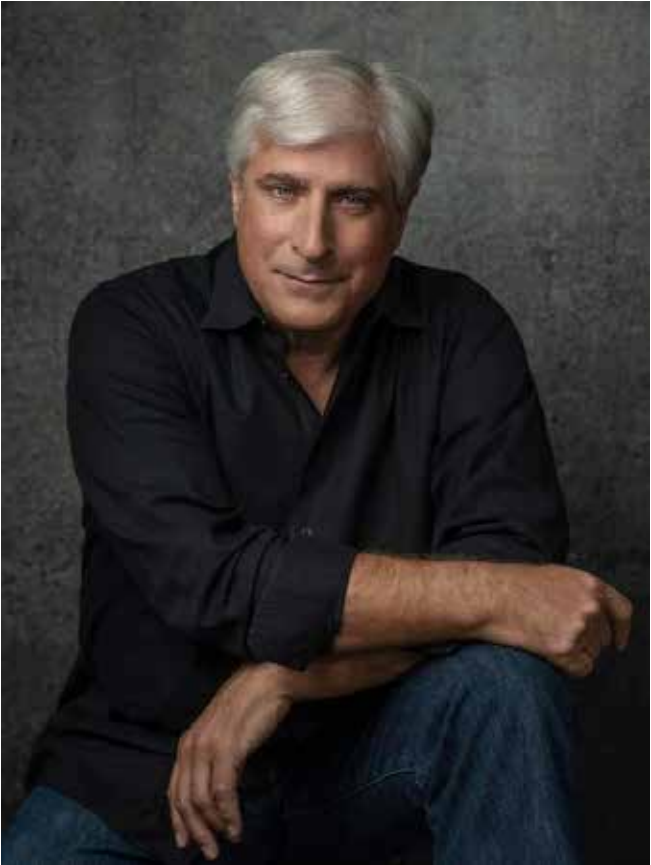
There is a big reward for any author who chooses to use HOAs or small towns like Louise Penny’s Three Pines to stage their mystery or suspense novels. While few of us hang out with spies, billionaires, CEOs, or professional hitmen, we’re acquainted with neighbors we think of as unsung heroes, self-serving loudmouths, arrogant bullies, or timid victims. Familiar characters and commonplace passions make it easy for readers to relate to the novels they inhabit.



About the author

Linda Lovely’s tenth mystery/suspense novel, *Neighbors to Die For*, debuted in November. Lee Child calls this second installment in Lovely’s HOA Mystery series “An excellent mystery written with charm, appeal and wry humor—and ex-Coast Guard Kylee Kane is a great main character.”

The author has earned finalist recognition in contests ranging from RWA’s Golden Heart for Romantic Suspense to Thriller Nashville’s Silver Falchion for Best Cozy Mystery. Lovely is secretary of the SE Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, and past president of the Upstate SC Chapter of Sisters in Crime. For several years, she helped organize the Writers’ Police Academy. To learn more, visit lindalovely.com.



Steve Berry
New York Times bestselling author

Steve Berry

Steve Berry is the *New York Times* and #1 internationally bestselling author of sixteen Cotton Malone adventures, five standalone thrillers, and several works of short fiction. His books have been translated into forty-one languages with 25 million copies in fifty-two countries. They consistently appear in the top echelon of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Indie* bestseller lists. Somewhere in the world, every thirty seconds, a Steve Berry book is sold.

Q. Cotton Malone is back in *The Last Kingdom*. What is he up to now?

Steve: It's a terrific story that involves a most interesting historical figure.

King Ludwig II.

It also centers around one of my favorite places in the world. Bavaria.

Ludwig II was an enigmatic figure who was deposed in 1886. In the years before he died, Ludwig engaged in a worldwide search for a new kingdom separate from Bavaria. Cotton's protégé, Luke Daniels, has managed to infiltrate a renegade group intent on winning Bavarian independence from Germany. Everything hinges on a 19th century deed. So it's a race across Bavaria for clues hidden in Ludwig's three fairytale castles.

Q. How did it feel to pick up this stalwart character after taking a break in 2022?

Steve: No problem at all. After seventeen adventures Cotton and I have become fairly close. He enjoyed his year off, but was ready to get back in the saddle.

Q. You're well known for the depth of historical research that goes into your books. What was it like researching *The Last Kingdom*? Were there any interesting tidbits on King Ludwig II of Bavaria, or others, that didn't make it into the story?

Steve: Like always, this novel required about three-hundred to four-hundred sources. There were also subjects here that I was not familiar with, but that's where the research comes in. I like it when there are new things to learn. There were also several trips to Bavaria, one in particular where most of the on-site research was accomplished. Elizabeth and I spent five days wandering through Ludwig's three castles. As to interesting tidbits, I did come

across several, but they all made it into the novel. I wouldn't want to spoil anything for readers by revealing them. But there are some things that will definitely surprise you.

Q. Last summer *The Omega Factor* came out and introduced readers to Nicholas Lee. Will we be seeing Nick again anytime soon?

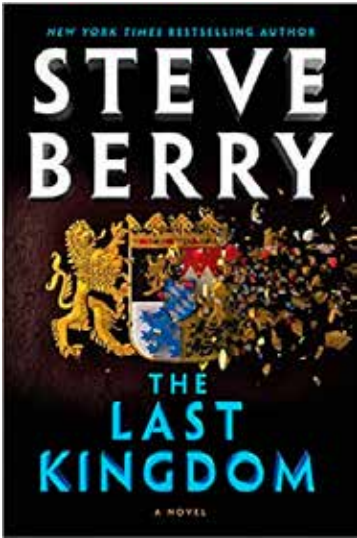
Steve: I hope so. I enjoyed creating him and his first adventure was a lot of fun. Readers seemed to like him, too. So you never know, he might make a return one day.

Q. What are you reading right now? What were some of your favorite books of the last year?

Steve: I'm just finishing up the 2024 novel, another Cotton Malone adventure called *The Atlas Maneuver*. It involves another subject that I knew little to nothing about, so I've been reading for the past year. What is that? Sorry, I can't say just yet.

Q. What's next?

Steve: After *The Last Kingdom* releases on February 21, Luke Daniels will have his first stand-alone story coming June 27. It's called *The Ninth Man* and centers around JFK's assassination and a theory that few know much about. It's being co-written with the great thriller writer, Grant Blackwood. Luke will return with two more adventures in the summers of 2024 and 2025. Cotton will return in early 2024 with *The Atlas Maneuver*. For the next three years, I'll have two books out each year.



Steve Berry's latest: *The Last Kingdom*

King Ludwig II of Bavaria was an enigmatic figure who was deposed in 1886, mysteriously drowning three days later. Eccentric to the point of madness, history tells us that in the years before he died Ludwig engaged in a worldwide search for a new kingdom, one separate, apart, and in lieu of Bavaria. A place he could retreat into and rule as he wished. But a question remains: did he succeed?

Enter Cotton Malone. After many months, Malone's protégé, Luke Daniels, has managed to infiltrate a renegade group intent on winning Bavarian independence from Germany. Daniels has also managed to gain the trust of the prince of Bavaria, a frustrated second son intent on eliminating his brother, the duke, and restoring the Wittelsbach monarchy, only now with him as king. Everything hinges on a 19th century deed which proves that Ludwig's long-rumored search bore fruit—legal title to lands that Germany, China, and the United States all now want, only for vastly different reasons.

In a race across Bavaria for clues hidden in Ludwig's three fairytale castles—Neuschwanstein, Linderhof, and Herrenchiemsee—Malone and Daniels battle an ever-growing list of deadly adversaries, all intent on finding the last kingdom.



Auction Night

BY TEHRA PEACE

Principal Lewis, 6:40 p.m.

Parents were the worst.

After twelve years as principal at Kenton Elementary, Melanie Lewis had learned a lot of things. How to sidestep a student on the verge of a meltdown because the lunch menu had been changed from pizza to grilled cheese. How to guilt an overworked teacher into coming back for one more year so that Melanie could kick the can a little longer on finding a replacement. How to dodge a neurotic parent lobbying to change her kid's grades because the ones he had earned fair and square hurt mom and dad's feelings. The most important thing Melanie had learned was that of all the people she dealt with in a given day, the kids were the easiest. The parents were the hardest, and they were about as emotionally mature as third graders, on average.

And tonight, she'd have to deal with them at their messiest.

Melanie looked over her shoulder at the door to the pavilion, then sucked deeply on her vape pen. She was wearing a shoulder-length red wig and a black turtleneck: Jennifer Garner's character from *Alias*.

Last year, Melanie had hidden in the bathroom while Kerri Burkhart and Elizabeth Larsen had a screaming match over the painted driftwood wall art made by Mr. Shell's fifth graders. Elizabeth had called dibs on it, since this was Eaton's last year at the school, and made a show of scrawling a three-figure number on the bid sheet. But somehow, Kerri's name had appeared just underneath with an even

more generous bid. Elizabeth's husband had to drag her, heaving and sobbing, out of the pavilion before the live auction had even started.

Later that night, Melanie had almost caught four of the second-grade dads trespassing into the amusement park. The theme that year had been Wild West, and they were trying to ride the wooden horses on the carousel but kept falling off. They were high, or at least she hoped so. Melanie could hear their giggles from far enough away that she was able to turn around before they saw her. It was park security's problem, not hers.

Auction Night was one of the most painful of Melanie's duties as principal, but it was worth it. It brought more money into the foundation than anything else they did by far, usually enough to fund an extra full-time teaching position. So the parents got to play dress-up, get drunk, and spend their money, and Melanie did her best to avoid the worst of it.

"Principal Lewis?"

Melanie stuffed her vape pen into her purse. How many times had she told Danielle to go ahead and call her by her first name?

"I was just about to come in."

"That's good. It's getting close to time." With her shoulders hunched forward, Danielle looked like she was being eaten alive by her oversized red trench coat, her face all but hidden beneath the matching red fedora. The coat was belted much too tightly around her waist. "I wanted to get your opinion on the dessert table. Don't you think it should

be closer to the silverware station? It’s just that you know how these parents get by that time of the evening, and it seems to me that the easier they can find the forks, the less they’ll be stumbling around ...”

Melanie wished Danielle would be more like the other parents. She might even be fun after a few cocktails. There was always one parent who had to act like she was better than the rest of them.

Inside the pavilion, there were long tables lined up at one end for the silent auction. Those were good money-makers. Parents donated most of the prizes—a stay at someone’s time share in the mountains. A handful of professional sessions from parents who were chiropractors or nutritionists. There were smaller prizes, too. A basket of DVDs and microwave popcorn for family movie night or a bubble bath and candle collection. Plus, each teacher had their class make an art piece, which had been the biggest source of drama last year.

But the big money was in the live auction, which came later in the night. It was the main event, when parents got to show off in front of each other. There would be drama, no doubt. But, as Melanie had found in past years, the more drama involved, the bigger the foundation’s coffers when it was all finally over.

Danielle was still talking when the DJ started playing his nineties pop playlist, even though Melanie had stopped listening long ago. The first guests were arriving. That meant the bar was open, and if Melanie could get there first, this night might go a little smoother.

Chelsea, 7:10 p.m.

The pavilion smelled like mildew. Chelsea remembered vaguely that it had flooded during a wet winter three years ago, right after they moved to the neighborhood. Why did the auction committee have to choose this place? Couldn’t they at least rent out a nice hotel ballroom? Surely the parents would be happy to pitch in more for the tickets.

Well, most of them would. This was Chelsea’s first year at Kenton, and she was aware that although this part of town had been transitioning for a while, there were still families phasing out of the school who were more on the ... *working-class* side.

Had the Château Mouton Rothschild been too much? Chelsea knew how important first impressions were. When *Executive Insider* interviewed her for their “40 Under 40” feature a few years back, they had quoted her as saying she wouldn’t be where she was today if she hadn’t learned how to win *people*, not just the accounts she managed as a partner at Redwood Capital. And what better way to win these people than with a generous contribution?

Casually, Chelsea flipped her long hair over her shoulder. She wore a floor-length black dress with a slit that went all the way up to her thigh. At her side (and behaving for now at least), Joel wore a simple black suit with an open-collared shirt. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Pitt-Jolie style. The slit was too much, if the wine wasn’t. But Chelsea wouldn’t have regrets about that. What good was a “spy night” theme if she couldn’t look a little femme fatale? She had been in Pilates classes for the last eight weeks and already felt eyes on her. She let the warmth of attention fill her.

Joel held the Mouton Rothschild with a mixture of pride and resentment. He *had* argued that it was too much. It would be the most expensive prize at the live auction. That was much more than they needed to donate, especially in their first year. What kind of expectations were they setting? Chelsea had swatted him down. She made twice what he did. Let her spend what she wanted. She and Charlotte, their kindergartener, would be living off the dividends and noteriety for the next five years.

One of the other dads, a bearded man in his forties who Chelsea didn’t recognize but Joel seemed to know, whistled. “Nice-looking bottle you got there.”

Chelsea beamed in what she thought was a slightly bashful way.

“Oh, we almost drank it on the way here, but figured we’d put it to better use,” Joel said before Chelsea could respond. “At least this way we’ll get a tax break. You wouldn’t believe what this baby goes for on the secondary market.”

She hid her frown. For all he had been complaining on the way here, and now he wanted to take credit? She patted his shoulder. “Well, let’s save ourselves the temptation and get it over to the prize table.”

As they made their way across the pavilion, Joel raised the bottle cheerfully at more people Chelsea didn’t recognize, including three different men dressed in black

tuxedos. James Bond. How original. How did Joel know so many people? He had been doing drop-off in the morning. For the first time, Chelsea had the uneasy feeling that she might not be in her usual element.

Danielle was stationed at the prize table. Chelsea cringed a little. Danielle was the least fun of all the moms she had met at the school. And she was clingy. Danielle had a kindergartener, too, and had tried to set up a playdate with Chelsea’s daughter early in the year. Chelsea had ducked her. Danielle already had an older kid at the school but didn’t seem to be friends with any of the other parents, which was a red flag. Chelsea didn’t want to get roped into a friendship with *that* parent. But at least Danielle could be trusted with a two-thousand-dollar bottle of wine without drinking it empty, which couldn’t necessarily be said of all of the mothers here.

Or could she? Danielle seemed distracted. She had been scanning the pavilion when Chelsea and Joel walked up, barely noticing them.

“I don’t mean to sound rude, but this is a very expensive bottle of wine. You’ll be here to watch it all night, won’t you?” Chelsea asked.

“Don’t worry,” Danielle said, her awful red fedora drooping awkwardly over one side of her forehead. “I’ll got it under control.”

Tyler, 7:30 p.m.

He had some breathing room. Finally. Tyler loosened the bowtie choking his neck. His wife had made him wear it, along with the rented tux that was too tight in the shoulders and everywhere else. At least he wasn’t alone. He had passed a James Bond in the parking lot, stood behind one at the bar, and saw a couple more hanging together by the DJ station. Each one was wearing a similarly snug getup. He wondered if their wives could even tell them apart. Maybe it was a good thing if they couldn’t.

Tyler studied the layout of the pavilion, at the same time taking stake of where the other parents were settling down. Chelsea and Joel were already there and had picked out a table right in the center of the room. There was an exit on the north end of the building that led to the back side of the pavilion. It was on the opposite end from the stage, which

meant most people would be facing the other way during the live auction. He glanced quickly at the prize table. He just needed to wait until the time was right.

There didn’t seem to be eyes on him at the moment. He sucked down his beer and headed back to the bar to grab another one. He needed a little courage. There was only one reason he had agreed to come to the auction. His wife had been surprised he was willing to go.

He had to be careful.

There. Standing in the bar line, he spotted what he had been looking for.

Danielle, 7:35 p.m.

From her vantage point behind the prize table, Danielle could see everything. People must have thought she was a saint for spending one of the most anticipated nights of the year guarding their prizes. In reality, Danielle didn’t care to be part of that crowd. The parents who came to these things always ended up making fools of themselves, drinking too much, buying too much, and talking too much. And the way some of their husbands acted was more than embarrassing. She couldn’t understand what kind of woman would let her husband get away with those things. She was more comfortable keeping an eye on it all, doing her part to keep things in order.

Even if things had just gotten less orderly.

Kerri Burkhart sauntered through the door, fashionably late and flanked on one side by her snooty husband, Dom, and her mousy best friend, Leah. She was dressed like Black Widow, in tight pleather leggings. Kerri was the kind of person the PTA wanted at the auction. She was wealthy and generous. But she was also cold to the other parents. In spite of being popular at school events, Leah was her only close friend. The perks of that friendship must be nice. Kerri had multiple vacation homes, and Leah’s family accompanied hers on trips several times a year. Plus, Kerri’s son, Sawyer, was insanely popular, which helped Leah’s shy son quite a bit.

It was too bad Kerri couldn’t buy a little self-awareness. If she didn’t always act like everyone had it out for her, people might like her. Leah was the real saint for putting up with her. Leah was too timid to call out Kerri on her

attitude. But things slipped out sometimes. Leah once told Danielle, in the strictest of confidence, that Sawyer had visited an inappropriate site on the laptop they let the kids use for Fortnite. Danielle was grateful for the warning. It was not the kind of influence Danielle would let her kids be around.

Kerri worked the floor while Dom grabbed drinks for both women before quickly disappearing into a gang of James Bonds. Danielle tensed up when Kerri and Leah started toward the prize table.

“What do we have here?” Kerri cooed when she saw the Mouton Rothschild. “This is a nice one, isn’t it? At least a few hundred bucks?”

Danielle managed a smile and tried to look mysterious, doing her best Carmen Sandiego. The hat helped. “You’ll have to wait until the live auction to find out. But what I can tell you is that Chelsea and Joel donated it.”

Kerri shot a meaningful look at Leah. “Those are the new kindergarten parents? The ones you told me about, right?”

Leah nodded.

Oh, no. Danielle wondered if they’d all get a repeat of the driftwood wall art scandal.

“Well, I’ll keep it in mind. Enjoy yourself, Danielle.”

After they walked away, Danielle scanned the room again, chastising herself for getting distracted. Where had her husband gone? He kept doing that, as if he wanted to disappear.

Danielle stood guard while dinner was served. The silent auction ended and the winners were announced without drama. So far, so good.

“Please take your seats for the live auction portion of the evening,” the master of ceremonies announced over the mic.

Danielle’s husband reappeared, finally. “The Burkarts invited me to sit with them. Can I join them?”

She would have rather he kept her company at the prize table, but he would just pout. “I suppose. Wait. Before you go.”

He turned around, almost looking impatient.

“Let me take your jacket. It’s too hot in here.” He was sweating.

“I’d rather keep it,” he said sheepishly. He was too insecure about his body.

“Give it here.”

He relented, then joined the Burkarts.

Danielle listened with waning interest to the prizes. There were weeklong stays at beach houses. A set of new winter tires. A mountain bike.

Then, the big prize.

“One bottle of Château Mouton Rothschild wine, a red blend from the Bordeaux region of France, retail value of two thousand dollars. The bidding will start at five hundred. Do I have five hundred?”

Silence.

Danielle peeked at Chelsea and Joel. Joel was lost in his phone, but Chelsea looked concerned.

“Five hundred? Do we have any takers for five hundred?”

Silence.

“Come on, folks, it’s a bottle of one of the world’s best wines. Five hundred dollars is a real steal. And it’s for a good cause.”

“Three hundred!”

At the Burkarts’ table, Kerri was giggling devilishly with her paddle in the air.

The MC hesitated, looking around the crowd for other takers. Then, he continued. “We have three hundred.”

Now, more people were looking at Kerri. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Three hundred going once.”

On the other side of the room, Chelsea was furious.

“Three hundred going twice.”

“Four hundred.” It was Chelsea. Her jaw was set. Joel wasn’t looking at his phone anymore. He had his head in his hands.

“Four hundred,” said the MC. “Going once. Going twice.”

At the Burkarts’ table, Kerri’s jaw hung open, and she clenched Leah’s arm as if watching the most entertaining thing in the world. Dom had his head lowered near Danielle’s husband’s shoulder, immersed in conversation and not paying attention to the scene unfolding.

“Come on, everyone!” Chelsea shouted, trying to sound happy but sounding unhinged. “It’s Mouton Rothschild!”

There were no bites.

“Sold! To the fine lady in the long black dress.”

The audience clapped, unsure of what had just happened. Chelsea forced a smile, and Joel left the table.

That was the end of the live auction, and dessert was



being served. Danielle watched for tripping hazards as the guests grabbed cake slices and cookies. Kerri slid up to the prize table, grinning slyly.

“So you’re letting your husband off his leash tonight, are you?”

Danielle shot a look back to where her husband had been sitting with Dom. They weren’t at the table. “What do you mean?”

“I saw him heading out back with the other dads, and when I walked by just now, I smelled you-know-what.”

Heat rose inside Danielle. She raced for the back exit, her red fedora flopping off her head and landing on the dance floor.

Tyler, 8:30 p.m.

Tyler wasn’t the smartest man, but he was smart enough to see his chance when he could take it. He had looked over at the prize table and realized it had to be now or never.

He had woven through the crowd, making his way to the prize table, and fumbled underneath the tablecloth. He had found what he was looking for and slipped it behind his back. He had slid across the pavilion and out the back door.

And now, he was free to enjoy his reward.

Chelsea, 8:35 p.m.

She couldn’t believe it. Buying back her own two-thousand-dollar bottle of wine for a stupid four hundred dollars. Joel was not happy with the amount they were now out. But at least they could resell the wine and recover some of the costs. They could get their tax deduction still, couldn’t they?

She just wanted to get her wine and get out.

But Danielle wasn’t at the prize table. Chelsea looked for the Mouton Rothschild. It wasn’t where it had been before. Danielle must have taken it with her, wherever she was.

A few minutes later, Danielle reappeared. She was missing her hat, and her cheeks were flushed. She smelled a little bit like ... was that weed?

“I need to get home. Can I have my wine, please?”

Danielle’s gaze shot to the place where the wine had been sitting. “You didn’t already pick it up?”

Chelsea’s heart dropped. “No.”

“Are you sure? Did Joel?”

“He did not.” Shock turned to anger. Someone would be paying for this.

Danielle looked at her in disbelief. “I was only gone for a minute.”

Chelsea almost felt bad for the woman. Her eyes were welling up with tears. Finally, Danielle said, “I need to find Principal Lewis.”

Principal Lewis, 8:45 p.m.

Danielle found Melanie in her car. For the second time that night, Melanie had to stash her vape pen in a hurry. She told Danielle that she had been loading up decorations. Luckily, Danielle was so emotional that she didn’t notice there was nothing in the SUV and no reason for Melanie to be sitting in the front seat.

Melanie had to go back into the pavilion and question the guests one at a time before they could leave.

Kerri Burkhart insisted that whoever had taken the wine had done it to punish her. “They want you to think I took it! They’re trying to frame me.” Leah wrapped her arm around her friend in sympathy. Kerri then accused Chelsea of stealing her own wine because she was mad that no one else had bid on it.

Chelsea laughed at Kerri’s accusation. Why would she steal her own wine? She had already bought it back. She had nothing to gain. She, in turn, accused Danielle of taking it. After all, it was pretty suspicious that Danielle had been in charge of watching it and had suddenly disappeared at the same time it had gone missing.

Danielle, who had managed to get away and down three shots at the bar—*Was that some kind of weird self-punishment?* Melanie had wondered—burst into tears. “I’m not like the rest of you!” she told them, sobbing.

Weaponized hysteria. Even if Danielle had done it, there was no way Melanie would get a confession.

After talking to the women, Melanie went looking for their husbands. She found them behind the pavilion.

Danielle’s husband, Tyler, was holding a pipe, and stood in a plume of marijuana smoke with Dom and Joel. Their giggling stopped when they noticed Melanie.

“I didn’t see anything,” she said, and then went back inside. It was clear that none of them had been involved.

At some point, the president of the PTA reminded Melanie that they had bought an insurance policy for the event, and Melanie immediately stopped her questioning. Chelsea and Joel would be paid the cash value of their donation. Kerri and Leah left with their arms around each other, Dom trailing behind. Tyler ordered an Uber for him and Danielle.

They were children, all of them.

Time to go home.

Leah, 10:30 p.m.

She just couldn’t help herself.

Leah knew how badly Kerri wanted to be liked, especially by the other parents at school. But Leah knew Kerri better than anyone, and she saw what other people didn’t: the deep insecurities that sent Kerri into a tizzy anytime she felt someone was attacking her character.

That tension was what kept them close as friends. Kerri valued Leah. She could trust her, and rewarded her for her loyalty. Leah always got to be the one invited to spring break at the Lake Tahoe house, or treated to massages when Kerri wanted to have a spa day, or given extra tickets to concerts when Kerri ended up with other plans.

But those were only perks. The real value was in their kids’ friendship. Leah’s son, Flynn, was naturally reserved. While all the other kids were swinging on the monkey bars at recess, Flynn would ask the teacher for classroom chores to keep him inside. It wasn’t until Leah had cozied up to Kerri that Kerri’s son, Sawyer, went out of his way to befriend Flynn. After that, it was smooth sailing. Sawyer was the connector. He had the best birthday parties, all the fun stuff to do. Even though people talked about Kerri behind her back, they never turned down an invitation on their kids’ behalf. And so Flynn was in.

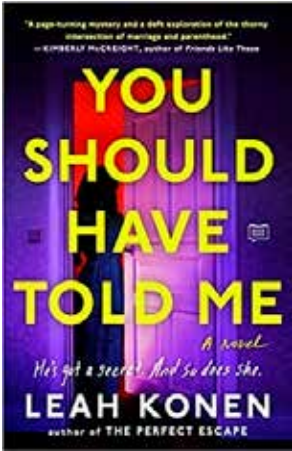
Leah opened the bottle of Mouton Rothschild and stretched out on her couch. It had been a long, exhausting

night. She took a big sip of the wine. She wasn’t really a wine person. The bottle itself meant nothing to her. It was just a means to an end. She liked to keep Kerri on edge, suspicious of others. She liked to keep the other parents at a distance, and it worked best when Kerri chased them off herself. That way, Leah got to be her closest friend, and her son got all the advantages.

The real prize was never the wine. It was being number one on Kerri’s list. It was just about how much Leah was willing to bid to get there.

Tehra Peace’s short fiction recently debuted in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. She is the production editor at *Mystery & Suspense Magazine* and lives with her family in Portland, Oregon.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SPRING



You Should Have Told Me
Leah Konen

Konen has written an unusual domestic thriller that puts postpartum depression at the center of murder, marriage secrets, and a missing husband. Janie, a new mom, has changed course dramatically. Once an up-and-coming professional, she fell in love, got pregnant, and suspiciously quit her job when she could have taken family leave. Now a full-time, breast-feeding, sleep-deprived mom to Freya, she's at her wits' end. Her devoted partner Max tries to help her, but she is in such despair that Max can't seem to help enough.

One night while Max cares for little Freya so that Janie can sleep, he disappears. Janie is frantic, yet Max's parents convince her to hold off from calling the police. Janie wonders if they are afraid of bad publicity. Yet, even Max's best friend Liana doesn't seem as concerned as Janie.

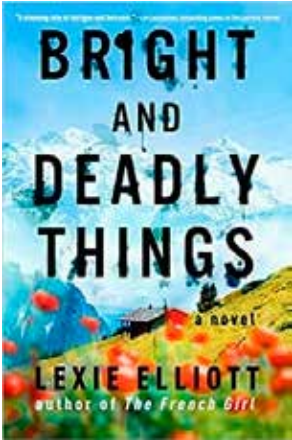
But that changes when a woman is murdered at a near-

by bar, and the police come calling. It seems that Max is the number one suspect. As secrets unfold and Janie's postpartum depression (PPD) worsens, everyone comes forward to help her—Max's parents, Liana, Janie's best friend Molly, and others from work and college. Unfortunately, Janie can't cope with their offers of help as she's been independent and self-sufficient, a characteristic that pushes others away. She also keeps a terrible secret that eats at her. Things could not get worse. But they do.

Konen's understanding of new motherhood comes from her own experience, which went viral on Twitter and was written about in *Vogue* magazine. Konen keeps the story tense and scary while showing the realities of a body and brain affected by PPD. Janie loves Max, but does she love Freya, a child who has brought her to tears, self-doubt, and fear?

The title works on many levels about what should have been told—between the couple and the parents, among friends, and to the police. The ending and the killer's identity bring the story to a finale that usurps expectations for the thriller genre but works for domestic suspense.

Reviewed by Valerie J. Brooks



Bright and Deadly Things
Lexie Elliott

Great characterization and atmosphere are highlights in Lexie Elliott's latest novel. Emily Rivers, a recently widowed Oxford don is one of the few invitees to a remote mountain-top retreat in the French Alps. The chalet has no electricity or running water, but does offer the opportunities to hike, read, work, and hopefully, heal. Among those attending

are some friends as well as other fellows, graduates, and undergraduates.

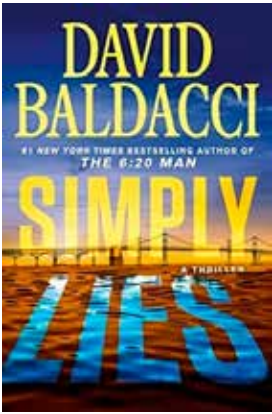
However, things start inauspiciously for Emily. She misses her flight and returns home to an intruder. Upon finally reaching the chalet, there are tensions among the guests, and competition for a newly opened position leads to an antagonistic attitude between several of the attendees. When a student disappears, Emily knows she needs to determine who is telling the truth and who is lying.

The author does a great job of giving readers a sense of each character. Their complex traits are shown through actions and words, not by telling. Emily is a strong but vulnerable protagonist that readers can easily get behind. The atmosphere and setting are almost alive; readers will easily envision the chalet and the surrounding mountains, valleys, and walking trails.

The novel builds suspense in a way that pulls readers into the lives of the characters. The plot has multiple suspects with realistic motives. Additionally, there are several twists and a few surprises along the way to keep readers engaged. Readers will enjoy the threads woven into the plot that give clues of things to be unraveled, if they are careful enough to notice them. Themes include grief, competition for jobs, work and personal relationships, jealousy, and much more.

Overall, this novel is entertaining with characters that are emotionally rich, with a descriptive narrative that transports readers to the French Alps.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Simply Lies
David Baldacci

Mickey Gibson's promising career with Jersey City Police Department was cut short two years ago when her scumbag of a husband absconded with all the money, leaving her alone with a one-year-old son and another kid on the way. She moved out of the force and the city to be closer to her retired parents, and joined a respected private investigation agency named ProEye as a cyber-sleuth, working from home full-time.

Gibson's difficult-but-tolerable life gets blown to hell one day when a woman calls her, ostensibly on her boss's behalf, and asks Gibson to urgently go to an old mansion about an hour away—belonging to a shady businessman with whom ProEye has a bad past—to inventory its contents. Welcoming the break from routine, and pleased by the promise of a field bonus, Gibson reaches the said mansion and, during her sur-

vey, discovers the body of a murdered man. When the police arrive after she calls it in, they start to treat her as a suspect, because the story about the mansion is completely false, and ProEye has no such employee as the one Gibson claims to have spoken to.

Simply Lies is yet another triumph for the master storyteller whose form seems to flow unabated. Right from the first scene where the single mother struggles with her two little children while talking on the phone with her boss, Baldacci's descriptions have a picture-like vividness that never goes away. Mickey Gibson is another smashing character from the author's prodigious stable: intelligent, resourceful, tenacious, and realistic. Her father, retired cop Rick Rogers, seems like a nice one to have around, as are her adorable little ones—when they are not puking on you. Baldacci keeps the mystery stretching as much as possible, unravelling it layer by tiny layer, and heightens the tension steadily. His uncomplicated prose, crisp dialogues, and shifting narrative perspectives keep the pages turning by themselves.

Reviewed by Aravind



We Knew All Along
Mina Hardy

Jewelann Jordan didn't know how her life would unravel when she attended her high school reunion, dressed in her designer clothing and Louboutin shoes. She only knew she wanted to look better than anyone else and show the guy who broke her heart what he missed out on. So she straps on her designer shoes from her storage locker, filled with hundreds of clothing items and shoes from estate sales and gives herself a pep talk, knowing it is all an illusion.

We Knew All Along is one of those books that draws readers in from the first page and doesn't let them go until the very last. Jewelann is stuck in an unhappy marriage with a man who refuses to let her work, is gone three weeks out of every month, and expects her to cater to his every need. She is deep in credit card debt, which her husband knows nothing about, because of her fondness for estate sales and designer clothing. Her 16-year-old son is traumatized from the death of his childhood friend and is described as "weird."

With no money and her house falling apart, she is in a downward spiral, so when she gets the chance to pretend to

be someone else at her high school reunion, she shows her ex, Christian, what he is missing but leaves him hanging. Jewelann feels powerful and has gotten her revenge, until she comes home one day and discovers Christian sitting with her husband, Ken, at the kitchen table. Ken has just rented the carriage house to him and she feels like she has made a big mistake.

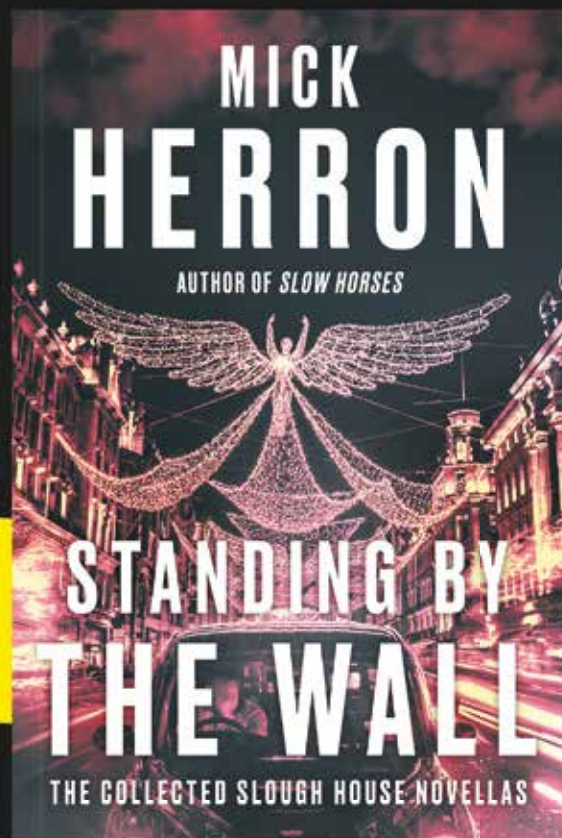
There are so many stories within this novel that sometimes it is hard to keep straight. Is Christian a stalker? Does he have an ulterior motive? Is Ken having an affair? What is going on with Eli, her son, and Christian?

Readers may initially feel bad for Jewelann; she seems to have an unhappy life. Further into the book, readers will realize she is not only the victim, but a martyr as well, who refuses to leave her husband. She has made terrible choices in her life, suffered and overcame an addiction, and stayed in a marriage where she didn't trust or love her husband because she couldn't afford to divorce him. When her husband's paychecks stop hitting her account, she realizes she must act quickly as the pearls fall around her like a necklace that has been cut (one of my favorite quotes in the book!).

We Knew All Along is a quick-paced mystery with a shocking twist readers may not see coming.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo

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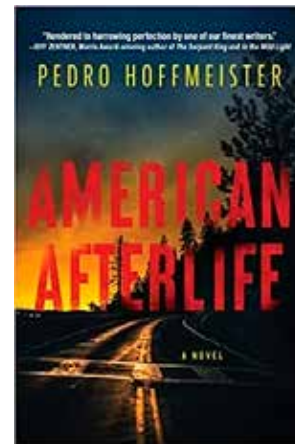
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American Afterlife Pedro Hoffmeister



American Afterlife is one of those rare gems where you not only discover a new author but find a book that is just so good, it will stick with you forever. The novel is bleak, relentless, and horrifying all at once, yet you continue to cheer for the heroine as she struggles to survive in a world no one would want to live in.

Cielo Wolfgang, a fifteen-year-old undocumented immigrant, came over from Mexico five years ago with her mother. She is now in Eugene, Oregon, abandoned by her mother for a religious cult. Cielo is living in a converted garage when a 9.2 earthquake hits. Rescue comes in the form of helicopters to help those who are still alive. However, because Cielo is undocumented and alone, she is terrified to be discovered. So when the planes come to rescue survivors, she hides in the garage to wait until they are gone.

Because of the earthquake, Eugene is now an island on all sides, with stagnant floodwaters and most of the town completely underwater. She uses a canoe to get around the city, foraging for food and supplies in different neighborhoods, which may or may not have half-dead survivors. On her own, she keeps an eye out for her mother but also for the evangelical cult, Collective of Redeemed Souls, who are going from house to house, rounding up survivors and taking them back to their headquarters.

This book can get political, but it is only a small piece of this gorgeous novel. Cielo's world is bleak as is her future. She relies on Xanax and alcohol to get through each day. The descriptions of her crawling through collapsed houses looking for food and medicine feel real because they are described with such intimate detail. What she doesn't know is that someone is watching her, a former collective member, acting as a savior. What is so beautiful about this novel is all the images, tiny details of the ruin of America. But also, Cielo is hardened and brave in the way a fifteen-year-old shouldn't have to be. Readers won't be able to help but root for her and want to protect her.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo

The Scorned David Putnam



Be prepared to immerse yourself in the chaotic crime world of Bruno Johnson as he reluctantly returns for yet another high-octane thriller brimming with mayhem and a high body count. Enter the violent and gritty world of Bruno, where his name is spoken with reverence when uttered by his adversaries—known on the streets for his unwavering

tenacity and penchant for meting out explosive violence when necessary.

His law enforcement career began almost thirty years ago in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and led to two decades of service on the Violent Crimes Team, hunting down murderers. He even had to do a brief stint in prison for killing his daughter's murderer. Bruno does have outstanding warrants for kidnapping, which seem to go unchallenged and uncollected. Bruno and his pregnant wife, Maria, have taken sanctuary in Costa Rica along with his cadre of children that they have rescued and "kidnapped"

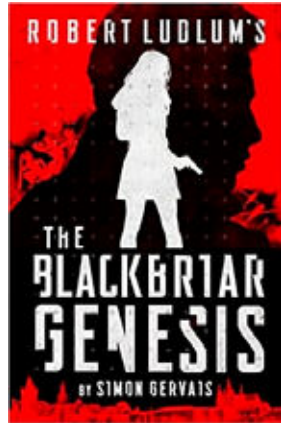
from their abusive and hostile homes. Their efforts have achieved mythic proportions—referred to as the underground railroad for abused children.

On the eve of Maria's unexpected and complicated delivery, he is tasked with two requests that he feels indebted to fulfill. His best friends, Dr. Vargas and his wife, Alisa, are visiting when Maria precipitously goes into violent labor. Dr. Vargas, under tense and dramatic circumstances, saves the lives of both Maria and the baby boy. They reluctantly ask Bruno to retrieve and rescue their only child, Layla. She is a college student at USC in Los Angeles, and is terrified of a threatening stalker.

Knowing Bruno's background, they absolutely feel he is the best one to rescue and accompany their daughter safely back home. How can he refuse?

David Putnam proves to be a masterful storyteller as he spins a gritty street tale. Although this is the tenth foray into the world of Bruno Johnson, it can be enjoyed and devoured as a stand alone, as Putnam seamlessly supplies the necessary back story. The exploits of Bruno Johnson rival those of Harry Bosch and Jack Reacher, and certainly will quench the thirst of action-thriller enthusiasts.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



The Blackbriar Genesis

Simon Gervais

Simon Gervais has a way of starting his novels with a shocking and powerful opening scene. His first novel in the Blackbriar series, which is within the Jason Bourne universe, is no different.

Action, suspense, treachery, and intrigue keep this novel moving at a terrific pace. It has aspects of espionage, political, and military thrillers. While set

mostly in the Czech Republic and Egypt, readers also travel to Greece, North Macedonia, Mexico, and the United States.

A car explosion in Prague causes the death of an undercover Treadstone agent. None of his superiors know why he was there. Two Blackbriar operatives, Helen Jouvart and Donovan Wade, are in the region and sent to investigate. While Treadstone is a clandestine assassination group, Blackbriar focuses on covert counterintelligence, counter-espionage, and intelligence gathering activities.

While there are several characters in this novel, the focus is on Helen, Donovan, and their boss, Oliver Manton. Helen

is the team leader; she is multi-lingual and has great investigating and hand-to-hand fighting skills. She's also competitive and his good instincts, but lacks the experience Donovan has in a firefight. Donovan is a good partner, thinks fast, and keeps his past private, but can be tough to read. Oliver is still adjusting to his new role. Readers get some insights into how he got the position as well as how he treats those reporting to him.

This suspenseful and action-filled story moves at a blistering pace. The author's military and federal experiences are reflected in well-crafted action situations and counter-surveillance activities that feel authentic. Each rapidly turned page provides new thrills and danger. The ultimate threat to be thwarted felt extremely realistic in today's world.

Overall, this novel is riveting, fast-paced, and engaging. Readers who enjoy espionage or military thrillers with strong lead characters may have found a new series. The combination of a thought-provoking and convincing storyline, pulse-activating action, breakneck speed, and terrific global settings makes this an intoxicating novel.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



The Bandit Queens

Parini Shroff

Must women endure the rules set by men in a patriarchal society? Parini Shroff tackles this dilemma and more in this endearing debut novel of dark comedy.

Plot brimming with misdirection, misunderstanding, murder, and mayhem, Shroff explores the serious injustices of the caste system, gender and

misogyny, religion, and power inequalities in the marginalized—especially women and the poor.

Five years ago, Geeta had the good fortune of her “no-good” abusive husband, Ramesh, leave without warning or trace. Gossip in her small village resoundingly assumed that Geeta killed him. On the whole this was a good thing, since no one messed with or harassed her, and her jewelry business soon thrived who would dare not buy from her ... a killer. Thus arose comparison between her and the legendary Phoolan Devi, affectionately known as “The Bandit Queen.” A young poor girl who grew up in a small Indian village who was sexually abused, and married off at age eleven. She later joined a gang and became its leader, robbing from higher-caste villages and punishing known rapists. (Her life has

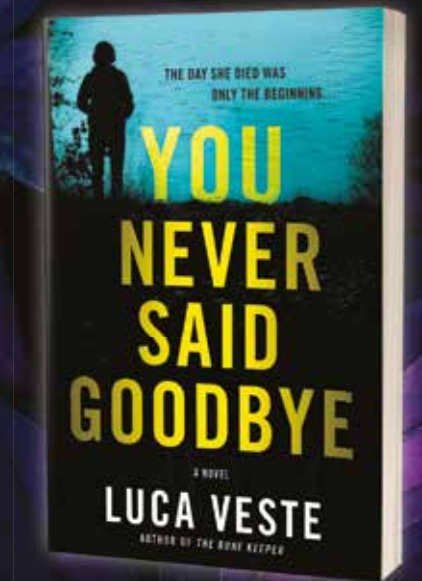
inspired a film and many books.)

Before long, Geeta is approached by other women of the village to assist in the removal of their abusive husbands. She is initially hesitant, but eventually coerced into becoming the village's consultant in helping women get rid of their “nose ring” (signifying their release from marriage). Suddenly there is a cadre of avenging women banding together to take back their independence and avoid the injustices of misogyny and violence heaped upon them. A black noir gathers steam and engenders murder, mayhem, blackmail, and fooling the police with misdirection and white lies. Who would suspect this results in many humorous situations and eventually devolves into almost slapstick humor?

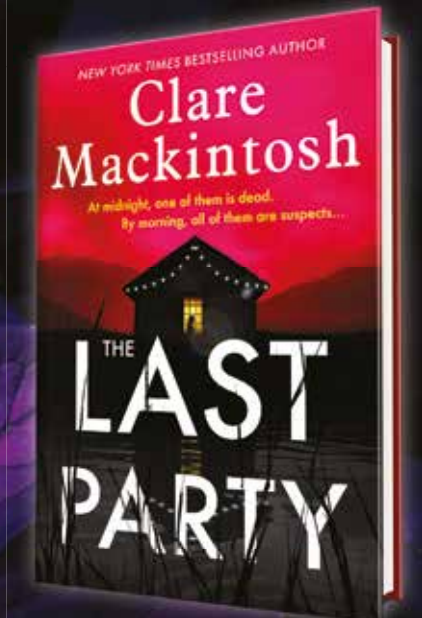
Shroff proves to be a masterful storyteller as she builds layers of complexity and ironic comedy of errors into this debut tale overflowing with polished prose and endearing and witty characters. This compelling debut explores serious themes while providing a darkly humorous look at a culture that is foreign to most American readers. Not to mention the side benefits of learning swear words in another language. But, most important, threaded throughout this page-turner is the importance and enduring nature of sisterhood.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs

Spring Suspense AT ITS BEST

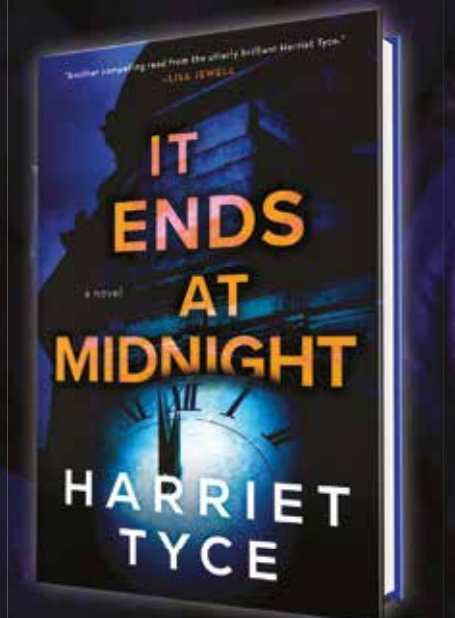


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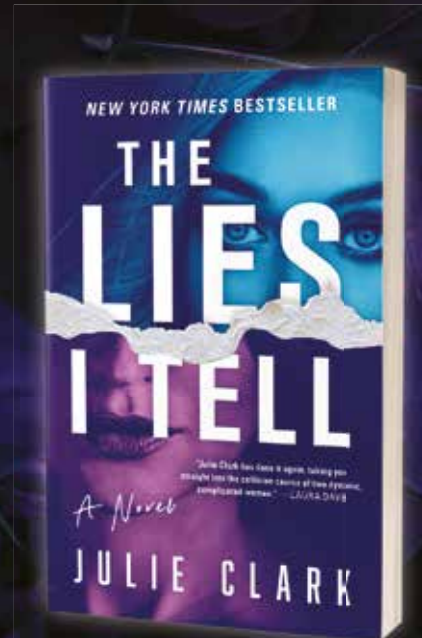
“WICKED FUN.”

—Patricia Cornwell,
#1 New York Times bestselling author



“GRIPPING.”

—Alex Michaelides,
New York Times bestselling author



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“UNPUT-DOWNABLE.”

—Samantha Downing,
international bestselling author



“DOWNRIGHT TERRIFYING.”

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