

# MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

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Doing the dirty work of others,  
as long as the price is right.

# KILLERS FOR HIRE

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**Author Q&As: Jo Nesbø, Peter James,  
Wendy Walker & John Scalzi**  
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**Feature: Crime-Solving Animals**

.....  
**Feature: Messages  
Wrapped in Mysteries**  
.....

**Reviews: *Leave No Trace*, *Still See  
You Everywhere*, and more**

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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

Grab a cozy blanket and open a gateway to a world of crime, thrills, horror, mystery, and suspense.



**Sam Boush**  
Editor-in-Chief

**H**old onto your magnifying glasses and brace yourselves for a rollercoaster ride through the latest digital edition of *Mystery and Suspense Magazine*.

For the spine-chill seekers and horror buffs, we've cooked up a tantalizing piece diving into the world of social commentary in horror. It's a real scream! And if your heart beats for edge-of-your-seat thrills, you're in for a double treat. We've got the lowdown on how wild weather whips up excitement in thrillers, plus a behind-the-scenes peek with sci-fi thriller maestro John Scalzi on his latest nail-biter, *Starter Villain*. Not to be outshone, kidnap thriller king Peter James spills the beans on his heart-stopping new tale, *Stop Them Dead*.

Mystery lovers, rejoice! We're paying homage to the legendary Ruth Rendell, the brain behind the iconic Chief Inspector Wexford. Delve into a rich character study that's as intriguing as the mysteries she penned. And for a dash of adorable detective work, don't miss our feature on crime-solving animals. Who knew furry friends could be such fantastic sleuths?

Craving some suspense? Dive deep into the mind of psychological suspense wizard Wendy Walker as she discusses *American Girl*, and enter the shadowy realm of supernatural suspense with Jo Nesbo's *The Night House*. And for those with a detective's nose for crime fiction, we've got a thrilling exploration of crime in board games and a chilling look at killers for hire. May each page keep you gripped and hungry for more as you journey through the dark, cozy months of winter.

Happy reading,  
**Sam**

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# Messages Wrapped in Mysteries

## A character study of Ruth Rendell

Ruth Rendell, also known by her pen name, Barbara Vine, was a pioneer of the thriller genre. In writing dozens of crime novels and short stories, she focused on character development and psychology, helping define what would become the modern psychological thriller.

BY LAURA KELLY ROBB

**R**uth Rendell wrote stories that often involved complicated social issues, such as homelessness, youth underemployment, racism, and child abuse. To avoid producing books that read like issue-laden tracts, Rendell employed techniques that engaged the reader in the story well before coming face to face with questions of morality and policy.

Whether or not a writer aims to incorporate weighty questions into the text, it might be worth looking at some of Rendell's approaches to concocting mysteries. Her career included two dozen Chief Inspector Wexford novels and thirty additional standalone books, as well as many short stories. Praised for her ability to drill down into the souls of her characters, Rendell left us a trunkful of ideas on how to make a mystery enthralling and entertaining.

This commentary looks at *Simisola* and *The Babes in the Wood*, as well as two books outside the Wexford universe, *Portobello* and *Judgement in Stone*.

### WRAP THE CHARACTERS IN DETAILS

Rendell imagined a panoply of characters and drew them in sharp relief.

Of a psychiatrist, Dr. Peacock, in *Portobello*:

She was a white-haired woman, the hair copious and long, with the face of a Russian ballet dancer and the barrel-shaped body of a bricklayer.

Of an elderly witness that Wexford suspects suffers from dementia in *The Babes in the Wood*:

Shand-Gibbs listened courteously, occasionally nodding, or giving a puzzled smile. He was like someone who has tentatively claimed to understand a foreign language,

but when addressed in it by natives, finds it beyond his comprehension.

Of a dangerous friend of the main character in *Judgement in Stone*:

Joan Smith's coiffure, wiry, stiff, glittering, had the look of one of the yellow metal pot scourers displayed for sale on her shelves. Her face was haphazardly painted, her hands red, rough, and untended.

Again, in *The Babes in the Wood*, Rendell, unbowed by standard grammar rules, describes the estranged grandmother and piles on the details:

She looked as chilly and stark as her artwork, a long lean woman...She must be well into her seventies, he thought, and yet the last thing you think about when you look at her is that she's old. That in spite of the wrinkles, the white hair, the gnarled hands.

Rendell's descriptive powers extended to the settings and other mood influencers, like the weather and the seasons. When added to her work drawing nuanced characters, her stories gain emotional depth.

### REDISCOVER THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

To keep Chief Inspector Wexford entertaining across dozens of novels, Rendell would reveal new facets of his character. In *The Babes in the Wood*, he and a female detective encounter a meeting of church elders who proceed to tell them women aren't included because it was a woman who brought about expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Wexford displays unusual sensitivity:

She [the detective] said nothing, but he was aware of a tremor of rage running through her.





In *Semisola*, Wexford surprises his colleague by bringing up the subject of racism:

"We're all racists," said Wexford as if he hadn't spoken. "Without exception. People over forty are worse and that's about all you can say. You were brought up and I was brought up to think ourselves superior to black people. Oh, it may not have been explicit but it was there all right."

Also in *Semisola*, Wexford reveals, before the interrogation of the victim's co-worker, that he can tell if someone is lying. After the interview, he notes:

She had lied a great deal, he thought, and he could pinpoint the moment at which the lying began: it was when he first uttered the word "key."

In *Portobello*, a non-Wexford novel, Joel Roseman, the only Jew among a group of neighborhood friends, confesses to having an invisible friend, Mithra, since childhood. Joel appears in various scenes, accompanied by the unseen Mithra, as a reliable, mature companion despite troubles at home. Only after several encounters does Rendell show the role of Mithra and reveal the isolation Joel has always felt:

He felt Mithra's presence rather like a perpetual touch, as if his visitor had laid a hand lightly on him and rested it there.

Her technique of adding to character descriptions over the course of several encounters enlivens the long and winding trail of her detectives' investigations. While they visit and re-visit homes and workplaces, Rendell keeps the narrative fresh by performing what one Goodreads reader called "a slow lift of the curtain."

### LIGHTEN THE THEME WITH HUMOR

Rendell's interest in human despair and the desperate acts that might follow would make for very dark reading if it weren't for her flashes of humor. They temper the story and often go hand-in-hand with reminders of our resilience.

In *The Babes in the Wood*, Wexford finds himself ill at ease in an informant's home where flouncy curtains fill the room:

It had the air of having been put together by an interior decorator recovering from a nervous breakdown.

In *Judgement in Stone*, Giles, a solitary teenager and recent convert to Buddhism, sets off for a walk to the nearest village. Rendell starts with soaring prose and then pulls the plug:

A limpid blue sky, pale green wheat growing, a cuckoo calling—in May he sings all day—an exultation of birds carolling their territorial claims from every tree. Pretending that none of it was there, refusing, in spite of his creed, to be one with the oneness of it, Giles drove over the river bridge. He intended to get as little fresh air as was compatible with going out of doors. He loathed the country.

In *Portobello*, the high-functioning Eugene has become fond of a sugar-free candy, neurotically imagining that he's dangerously addicted. He treats himself to one of the pellets he's been battling all day to forget, but he tries to cover his tracks when he realizes he's not alone in his living room:

His mouth was empty and dry. He heard himself utter a low moan and turned it quickly into a cough.

In *Judgement in Stone* again, Jacqueline, the lady of the manor, rebuffs her sister-in-law when she calls Eunice, their sole employee, "creepy."

"You're as bad as George. I don't want to make a friend of my servant. I want her the way she is, marvellously efficient and unobtrusive. I can tell you, she really knows her job."

"So do boa constrictors," said Audrey.

Much more could be said about other Rendell traits, such as structuring plots around red herrings, and her overall narrative lyricism as opposed to extensive use of dialogue. She was also a good student of irony and adept at hollowing out stereotypes. I wish she were still here to coach us herself.



### About the author

**Laura Kelly Robb** writes mystery and suspense novels. *The Laguna Shores Research Club*, published by TouchPoint Press in 2022, tells the story of an artist in St. Augustine whose search for her neighbor's killer reveals a web of corruption. A sequel is expected in 2024. A fan of history, outdoor sports, and yoga, Laura lives on the Georgia coast and takes a break from the heat each summer in the San Juan Islands of Washington State. She loves to hear from readers at [Laura@laurakellyrobb.com](mailto:Laura@laurakellyrobb.com).

## Social Commentary in Horror

When scary stories get political

**P**eel back the layers of a juicy horror tale, and what might one find lurking beneath? Grotesque monsters, bloodthirsty vampires, and shadowy apparitions? Of course. But dive a little deeper, and there emerges a world where horror and politics tango, shedding light on pressing societal issues.

Take George Orwell's dystopian classic, *1984*. Not exactly the first book that springs to mind when one thinks of horror, right? Yet, it's an unsettling narrative about an omnipresent surveillance state that strikes terror into our hearts. Orwell critiques totalitarian regimes and issues a stark warning about sacrificing personal freedoms for the illusion of security. Disturbing? Yes. Relevant? Absolutely.

Then there's the iconic *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin. On the surface, it's a chilling tale about suburban wives being transformed into docile robots. But dig a little, and it reveals a biting critique of patriarchal values, consumer culture, and the often suffocating roles women are expected to play.

Horror films and TV adaptations haven't been shy about dipping their toes into these politically charged waters either.

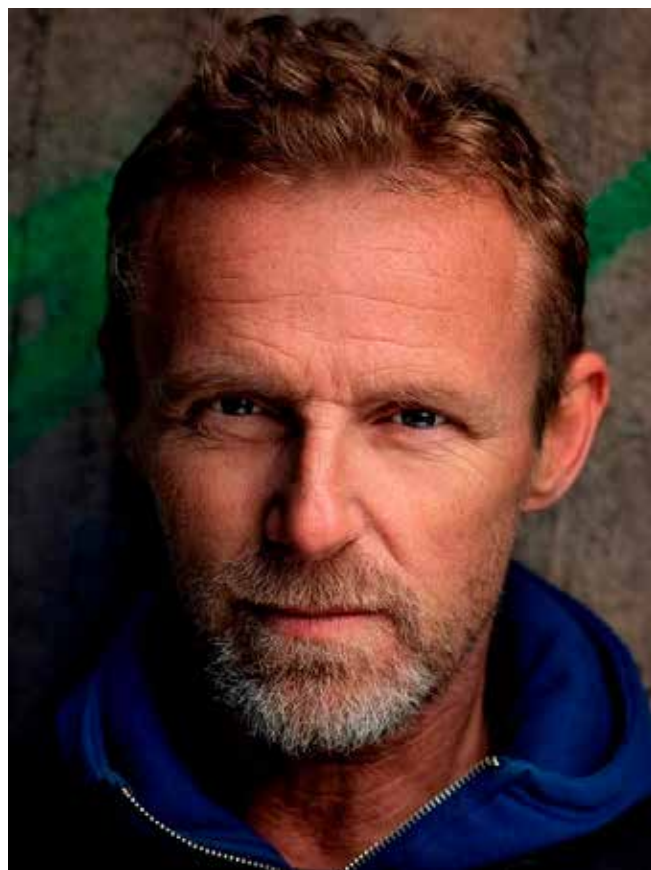
*Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele, deftly combines the trappings of a horror-thriller with sharp observations about race relations in America. Through the terrifying premise of black individuals being kidnapped and brainwashed to serve white families, Peele offers a stark reflection on racism, privilege, and the appropriation of black culture.

Another silver screen gem that stands out is *They Live* by John Carpenter. The story follows a man who discovers a pair of sunglasses that lets him see the world as it truly is, overrun by skull-faced aliens. Beyond the screams and shudders, the film dives deep into the critique of consumerism, mass media manipulation, and societal complacency.

On the smaller screen, the anthology series *Black Mirror* often infuses its tech-centered horror stories with timely societal concerns. From the dark side of reality TV in *Fifteen Million Merits* to the exploration of social credit systems in *Nosedive*, each episode is a reflection on the potential pitfalls of our increasingly interconnected and digitized world.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* deserves a special mention too. While many view it as a tragic tale of a creature abandoned by its creator, the novel also delves into the dangers of unchecked ambition and the ethical questions surrounding scientific advancement. Frankenstein's creature becomes a symbol of the consequences of playing god without considering the ramifications.

Horror has a unique ability to make audiences confront uncomfortable truths. By wrapping societal critiques in layers of suspense and terror, the genre ensures that these messages aren't just heard; they're felt. Furthermore, infusing horror stories with political undertones gives them a longevity that pure shock-value tales might lack. They become snapshots of the societal anxieties of their time, evolving and adapting to the ever-changing landscape of human fears and concerns.



Jo Nesbø  
*Sunday Times* bestselling author  
 jonesbo.com

## Jo Nesbø

Jo Nesbø is one of the world's bestselling crime writers, with *The Leopard*, *Phantom*, *Police*, *The Son*, *The Thirst*, *Macbeth*, and *Knife* all topping the *Sunday Times* bestseller charts. He's an international number one bestseller and his books are published in fifty languages, selling over 55 million copies around the world.

**Q. *The Night House* has been described as a subversion of expectations. Without giving away too much, can you elaborate on this aspect and how it adds to the intrigue of the story?**

**Jo:** I think we—the generation of story consumers—have become so good at quickly identifying genres that we don't even think about the way it triggers our expectations. This gives the storyteller a new way of playfully manipulating the reader by leading them, or rather pointing them, down an alleyway that seems familiar. Only it leads to a place you didn't expect. Then again, mentioning the subversion is a spoiler of course, so in a way I wish you hadn't asked this very relevant question.

**Q. The town of Ballantyne is portrayed as remote and insular, with a dark and mysterious atmosphere. How did you approach creating the setting to enhance the sense of horror and suspense?**

**Jo:** I can see Ballantyne, so I guess it's a combination of places I've visited as a kid, travelling with my band or as a writer. It's a place in the U.S., and it's a place in Norway or anywhere. First of all it's a place with an abandoned house in the woods, and it's up to you—the kid—to guess why it's been abandoned.

**Q. What do you hope readers will take away from *The Night House*, and how do you think it adds to your body of work?**

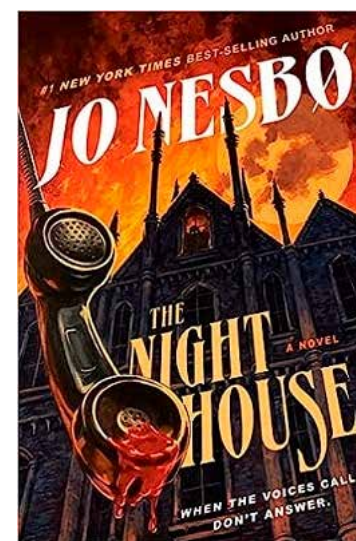
**Jo:** I think it's a story about what a great vehicle for travelling our minds are. Travelling to good and bad places, whether we feel we're in the driver's seat or it's our experiences taking us places. Anyway, our dreams and nightmares are made up by us, we are actually the director, although we feel like only being in the audience. I don't think much about my body of work, it's nothing I find fruitful to reflect upon, it may even be the opposite. Ask me when I've retired.

**Q. How do you balance the dark and gritty elements of crime fiction with the need to engage and entertain readers?**

**Jo:** I have a gut feeling that I follow, which has to do with my own tastes and needs. If that happens to coincide with a number of reader's tastes and needs, it's pure luck. Sometimes I've been lucky.

**Q. Can you discuss the importance of pacing and tension in your storytelling?**

**Jo:** Like with balance, for me, pacing and build-up is a question of gut feeling. I wouldn't call it instinct, because unlike instincts, a lot of cognitive thinking goes into the construction of a story. But it's like making music or food, you need to be able to hear it like music, not only like "my composition," and you need to really taste the food, not only know the recipe. As in life, the road may be the goal of a story. You can make a beautiful and fulfilling story without much pacing and tension. But I think it's very rare. The build-up may be about something else than what seems obvious, but it's there and it needs the right pacing and tension to have the intended effect. I think build-up and revelation in a good suspense story is similar to what comedians call timing, which may be defined as giving the audience the punch-line just before they've predicted—or half-way predicted—the punch-line themselves. If I've succeeded in a who's-done-it-story, the reader's reaction should be "of course!," not "really?"



### Jo Nesbø's latest: *The Night House*

In the wake of his parents' tragic deaths in a house fire, fourteen-year-old Richard Elauved has been sent to live with his aunt and uncle in the remote, insular town of Ballantyne. Richard quickly earns a reputation as an outcast, and when a classmate named Tom goes missing, everyone suspects the new, angry boy is responsible for his disappearance. No one believes him when he says the telephone booth out by the edge of the woods sucked Tom into the receiver like something out of a horror movie. No one, that is, except Karen, a beguiling fellow outsider who encourages Richard to pursue clues the police refuse to investigate. He traces the number that Tom prank-called from the phone booth to an abandoned house in the Mirror Forest. There he catches a glimpse of a terrifying face in the window. And then the voices begin to whisper in his ear...

*She's going to burn. The girl you love is going to burn. There's nothing you can do about it.*

When another classmate disappears, Richard must find a way to prove his innocence—and preserve his sanity—as he grapples with the dark magic that is possessing Ballantyne and pursuing his destruction.

Then again, Richard may not be the most reliable narrator of his own story...



## CRIME

and

## BOARD GAMES

A rain-soaked alley, the shadow of a detective in a fedora, the glint of a pocket watch signaling danger: these are staples of crime fiction. They seep through the pages of novels, dance on the big screen, and occasionally make their way into our living rooms through the medium of board games. The relationship between the literary world of crime fiction and the tactile universe of board games is tighter than one might assume at first glance.

Take a closer look at board games like “Detective” and “Spy Alley.” They’re not merely diversions meant to pass the time on a lazy Sunday afternoon. They are immersive experiences, meticulously designed to give players a taste of the thrilling, suspense-filled world of espionage, deduction, and mystery.

Let’s begin with “Detective.” It isn’t just a game; it’s an experience that sinks its hooks into the narrative allure of crime fiction. Each case feels like a mini-novel, ripe with plot twists, multidimensional characters, and carefully crafted backgrounds. But there’s a twist: instead of merely reading a narrative, the players become active participants in it. They’re required to sift through clues, connect the dots, and use their grey cells to reach a satisfying conclusion. The parallels with crime fiction are evident. Think of *Sherlock Holmes*—both the books by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the series starring Benedict Cumberbatch. In both formats, the joy isn’t just in following the detective but in attempting to solve the mystery alongside them. “Detective” merely provides an interactive platform for this very experience.

Then there’s “Spy Alley.” Here, the game captures the enigmatic aura surrounding spies, not too dissimilar from the thrillers penned by John le Carré or the suave allure of Ian Fleming’s James Bond—be it in print or its celluloid adaptations. Every move in “Spy Alley” is about deception and strategy. The players embody characters straight out of a cold war narrative, always second-guessing their moves, playing their cards close to their chest, and watching their

back. The novels and films based on spies often revolve around these very elements—trust no one, everyone’s a suspect. The resemblance is uncanny.

But it’s not just the storylines or the mechanics of these board games that forge the bond with crime fiction. The aesthetic of these games often echoes the iconic imagery of classic noir films or the cover art of a best-selling crime novel. The dusky shades, the mysterious characters, the cityscape backdrop—they all tell a tale of their own.

Now, let’s take a brief detour and venture into the world of television. One might argue that some series, like *Broadchurch* or *True Detective*, in their episodic nature, resemble a board game’s gradual progression. Each episode, like every move in a board game, uncovers a layer, bringing the viewer (or player) closer to the truth. The narrative tension, the cat-and-mouse chase, the interplay of characters—they all mirror the dynamics of a tense board game round.

The reciprocal relationship between the two mediums goes further still. Crime novels and their adaptations have inspired board games. In contrast, the mechanics and strategies of certain board games have found their way into the plots of crime stories. A master strategist in a game could very well be the criminal mastermind in a novel. The detective, with his methodical approach, mirrors the player attempting to win the game by cracking the code.

Board games, much like crime fiction, hinge on conflict, strategy, and resolution. They draw players into a world where every decision counts, where the stakes are high, and where victory is sweet. The resonance between these two worlds is not coincidental. It is the result of decades of evolution in storytelling and game design, two fields that intersect more often than we realize.

So, the next time the rain is pouring outside, and there’s a detective novel lying on the coffee table while a board game beckons from the shelf, know this: Choosing between them is merely selecting the medium. The spirit of suspense, strategy, and story remains steadfastly the same.





**Peter James**  
UK No.1 bestselling author  
peterjames.com

## Peter James

Peter James is a UK No.1 bestselling author, best known for his Detective Superintendent Roy Grace series, now a hit ITV drama starring John Simm as the troubled Brighton copper.

Much loved by crime and thriller fans for his fast-paced page-turners full of unexpected plot twists, sinister characters, and accurate portrayal of modern day policing, he has won more than forty awards for his work, including the WHSmith Best Crime Author of All Time Award and Crime Writers' Association Diamond Dagger.

### Q. *Stop Them Dead* looks to be one of the must-read kidnap thrillers of 2023. What inspired you to write the story?

**Peter:** A news story I read in the early days of lockdown utterly shocked me. An elderly lady was brutally mugged in a park and her dog, a golden doodle puppy, was stolen. It opened my eyes to a whole new and sinister area of crime that was then in its infancy but is sadly now a major revenue stream for what the police call Organized Crime Gangs.

I always try to be original and topical in my Roy Grace novels, and to tackle issues of the day. I had a meeting with the Chief Constable of Sussex, Jo Shiner, a few months later, asking her what was new in terms of criminality in the county, and she said one of her big concerns, as a dog lover, was the explosion in crime around dogs because everyone wanted a "lockdown dog."

The price of both puppies and adult dogs soared—for instance a labrador that could have been bought for a few hundred pounds before COVID would fetch £3-5k. Countless unregistered dog breeders jumped on the bandwagon and so did Organized Crime Gangs, who realized that by illegal breeding, smuggling in puppies from Europe, and the really horrific crime of mugging people in parks and stealing their beloved pets, they could make more money than by dealing in drugs—and with pathetically light sentences if caught, in comparison.

I've always been a huge dog lover, as is my wife, and the thought of having a beloved pet stolen is almost too horrible to think about. The more I started looking into this whole new area of crime, the more horrified I was and the more I felt it needed to be exposed. I talked to the RSPCA and they shared my concerns and offered me wonderful research help—as well as some startling facts; for instance, a particular shade of breeding bitch Blue French Bulldog could be sold for as much as £100k, and its puppies, £25k each. Small wonder it is a goldmine for criminals.

### Q. This is the 19th Roy Grace thriller. How has the character of Detective Superintendent Roy Grace changed over time?

**Peter:** Although I'm now writing the 20th Roy Grace thriller, I did not want to age Roy Grace a year in each book, so I have taken licence with time: I have moved each book forward a year, culturally, but in real time only a few days or weeks and some of the novels even start the day after the previous one ended. So that over the first twenty books Roy only goes from coming up to his 39th birthday to approaching 43.

But in these four years, Roy has changed a lot. When we first meet him, it is nine years after his beloved wife, Sandy, had seemingly vanished off the face of the earth, and despite functioning as an effective homicide detective, he has been unable to move on with his private life, using all his spare time to hunt for Sandy in every possible way, including going to mediums. He has no idea whether she is alive or dead. Did she have an accident? Take her own life? Run off with a love? Get kidnapped by a maniac? Was she murdered? Lost her memory? But finally, at the start of the series, Grace finds a new love, in Cleo who runs the Brighton mortuary. They marry, have kids, whilst all the time he wonders what might happen if Sandy suddenly turned up. But at least he has moved on and when the surprise that could rock the very foundations of his happiness finally occurs, he is now strong enough to handle it.

### Q. How has the ITV *Grace* series impacted your writing, if at all? How has it impacted your readership?

**Peter:** Strangely enough the TV series, *Grace*, has had a hugely positive impact on my writing. One of the hardest things as a writer is to create convincing and sympathetic characters, and every character I have ever written is based on someone I have met. But very often I put them in a different career—for instance I might know a brain surgeon, but think he would be a great model for a chef, or a painter. Now with John Simm, Richie Campbell, and all the rest of the cast, who

I have spent a lot of time with, I know exactly how they talk, laugh, eat, move, etc., and it has made bringing them to life on the page so much easier in many ways.

In terms of my readership, the feedback we have had from my fans has been overwhelmingly positive, and even the few who said initially that John Simm was not how they had imagined Roy Grace have come round and almost all of them have said they now think he is perfect casting. I certainly do.

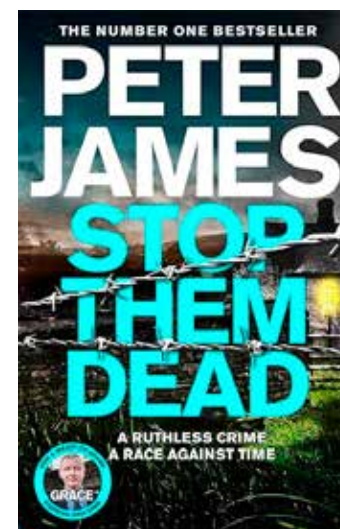
### Q. Your novels often delve into the psychology of both the detectives and the criminals. How do you approach crafting these complex psychological profiles?

**Peter:** I like to write from three perspectives: That of the victim, that of the offender/s and that of the police. I've been going out with police on a fairly regular basis for the past thirty-five years—here in England, in the United States, and in many other countries in the world, including Russia, where in 2007 our police car was shot at! The police have their own culture, and their own way of looking at the world, and many times I've hear the police refer to "us and civilians." And it is very true, their world is different and generally exclusive. But they have always liked the way I write about them and regard me as "family" which is massively helpful for my research.

In terms of criminals—one of the charities I put a lot of time into supporting is called The Reading Agency. In UK prisons the average reading age for 60% of the inmates is below 11 years old. As part of my work for this charity I do regular talks in prisons, encouraging them to read—and to write. But it also gives me many opportunities to talk to prisoners at all levels, from minor offenders to gangsters and murderers.

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

**Peter:** I'm currently editing a novel which I think my fans—as well as new readers—are to find interesting! It is called *They Thought I Was Dead—Sandy's Story*. It tells the story of what really happened to Roy Grace's missing wife! It will be published next spring.



### Peter James's latest: *Stop Them Dead*

When a young farmer confronts intruders in the middle of the night he has no idea that just minutes later he will be left dying in a pool of blood. What's more chilling is what the perpetrators were willing to kill for.

At the scene of the crime, Detective Superintendent Roy Grace soon realizes this is no isolated robbery gone wrong but the tip of the iceberg of a nationwide crime wave, in which ruthless organized gangs are making more money from the illegal trade in dogs than drugs. A trade which pits him against some ruthless people who will kill anyone who gets in their way, because where there is greed, there is murder.



# KILLERS FOR HIRE

BY C.J. WASHINGTON



The killer for hire is a staple of crime fiction, for good reason. As those who do the dirty work of others, they occupy a unique space in the criminal world. They commit murder for money, but they may or may not enjoy the act of taking a life. Some will kill anyone if the price is right while others need justification.

Many seem to lack a conscience, but a few rely on coping mechanisms to mitigate their guilt. They come in many forms and flavors, and the rarest are those we can't help but like, or at least respect, even as we're appalled by their violence. But why would we ever like them?



## THE UNLIKELY KILLER FOR HIRE

My personal favorite is the unlikely killer for hire. By unlikely, I don't mean to suggest they aren't good at their job. They can be as ruthless and efficient as any other contract killer. Instead, they possess quirks that are at odds with their profession. Melvin Smiley from the 1998 film *The Big Hit* is a quintessential example. An indifferent killer, Melvin suffers severe mental distress whenever anyone is angry with him. From his run ins with a surly video rental store clerk to the demands of his churlish girlfriend, he chugs antacids to cope with awkward social situations, only at ease it seems when he's doing what he does best: murder for hire.

Barry, from the television series *Barry*, is another unlikely hitman. A skilled and efficient killer prone to depression, Barry is plagued with a conscience. Sometimes. When he stumbles upon an acting class, he thinks he's found a vehicle to self-discovery and a way out of the killing business. As many aspiring actors learn, however, the road to stardom is rarely easy or linear, even for a guy who desperately needs a career change.

## THE KILLER FOR HIRE YOU'D HAVE OVER FOR DINNER

Maybe you wouldn't want a contract killer to have your home address. I wouldn't. But some fictional killers for hire seem like nice people. They're interesting. People you'd like to share a meal with. In a neutral, public location, of course. John Keller from Lawrence Block's *Hitman* series is perpetually in pursuit of self-improvement. That might mean dabbling in therapy, talking through sensitive issues with his dog, or trying a new hobby like philately. A killer with a conscience, Keller occasionally goes off script during a job. And he's second to none at extracting himself from tight spots. If you can get him to open up over a bottle of wine, you're certain to hear some entertaining tales.

Billy Summers from the Stephen King novel *Billy Summers* uses his intellect for more than planning hits. He enjoys literature and even aspires to pen his own masterpiece. A charming, down-home guy, he only accepts jobs to kill bad people. He's also thoughtful enough to ask: If bad people pay him to kill other bad people, where does that land him on the spectrum of human virtue? After dinner, especially if there are kids in the house, he'd be up for a game of Monopoly, but be forewarned: He plays to win.

## THE LITTLE KILLER FOR HIRE THAT COULD

Everyone loves an underdog, and even ruthless, competent killers can struggle in their personal lives. Martin Blank from the 1997 film *Grosse Pointe Blank* confronts his fear of intimacy head on when he returns to Grosse Pointe for his ten-year high school reunion and faces the love of his life, a woman he abandoned without explanation a decade before. Overcoming relationship phobias is always a challenge, but a killer for hire carries unique baggage into the battle. His interactions with his therapist are strained by his job, and then there is the matter of explaining his career choices to the woman of his dreams. His efforts are valiant, and it's difficult not to root for him.

## THE PRETERNATURALLY SKILLED KILLER FOR HIRE

Nena Knight from Yasmin Angoe's *Nena Knight* series works for an organization called the Tribe, and each assassination is meant to further their cause. She is a killer with a mission. She may go off script occasionally, but only in service of justice. She's loyal and principled, and, yes, possesses crazy skills that demand respect. She's the only killer for hire on the list who does her job to create a better world.

It may not be easy to like Villanelle, the assassin from Luke Jennings's *Killing Eve* book series, but it's hard not to respect her. Like Nena Knight, many of Villanelle's hits are political. Unlike Nena Knight, Villanelle seems uninterested in politics. Trained in weapons combat by her father, her youthful acts of violence are in pursuit of justice, separately avenging her father's murder and the unprosecuted rape of a teacher she'd grown close to. The savagery and brazenness of her crimes attracted the right (or wrong) attention, and hence began her journey to premier international assassin. Free of remorse, Villanelle enjoys killing and looks forward to the release. Even if you root for Eve, former MI5 agent and Villanelle's likable antagonist, you can hardly be blamed for wanting to see Villanelle live another day, just so the cat-and-mouse game can continue. Best of all, once you've finished the books, you can tune in to Hulu for the television series. I hope that John Keller, Billy Summers, and Nena Knight will soon join Villanelle, Melvin Smiley, Martin Blank, and Barry on the screen.



### About the author

**C. J. Washington** is a data scientist and writer. He has a master's degree in computer science from the Georgia Institute of Technology and lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife and daughter. You can find him on YouTube or at [cj-washington.com](http://cj-washington.com).



**Wendy Walker**  
International bestselling author  
wendywalkerbooks.com

## Wendy Walker

Wendy Walker is the author of the psychological suspense novels *All Is Not Forgotten*, *Emma in the Night*, *The Night Before*, *Don't Look for Me*, *What Remains*, and *American Girl*. Her novels have been translated into twenty-three foreign languages, topped bestseller lists nationally and abroad, and have been optioned for television and film. Prior to her writing career, Wendy practiced corporate and family law, having earned her J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center. Wendy also worked as a financial analyst at Goldman, Sachs & Co.

**Q: Why did you decide to turn your audio book into a printed version?**

**Wendy:** I worked with Audible for a novella of mine, *Hold Your Breath*. Once it went to Audible there were changes made to the story. The main character, Charlie, never had her condition spelled out. Readers could tell she was neurodivergent. This story became number one for Audible across all fiction. Since it was doing so well, I decided to revise the story slightly to make it for print. And here we are. It is an ode to a woman's life that starts at seventeen.

**Q: What was the inspiration behind the story's plot?**

**Wendy:** The summer of 2019, I was at a restaurant bar with a friend. When the song "American Girl" came on, I got up to dance. There were young people there who were flirting with each other, in their little packs. I had a lot of images in my head. I had a visceral that transferred me back to what it was like to be seventeen. As I was seeing women in different stages of life in this restaurant everything came together in a perfect storm. I had an acknowledgement on the realities of life. I thought of all the dreams I had. I became obsessed in writing a story. This was the first plot of mine that came from a character with all the other supporting characters giving life to Charlie. All the characters were written to express what I had experienced, the trajectories of a woman's life.

**Q: What was the reason behind portraying Charlie as autistic?**

**Wendy:** I wanted to explain why she is perceptive of the world. When she narrated the story, she is analytical and a little bit dispassionate even when things around her are very emotional and chaotic. She was atypical at that age. Most teenagers at that age are consumed with their own lives, their friends, but not the adults around them. I remember thinking how the adults were irrelevant to me when I was seventeen, that parents could not understand me. I did a lot of research

and spoke to specialists in the field, advocates of autism. It was really an education for me about autism. I learned how autistic people are all so different, and unique, especially the way their brains work.

**Q: How would you characterize Charlie?**

**Wendy:** She has a good memory, good at math, but not good at relating to people. She does not like loud noises or bright lights. She concentrates, an observer, loyal, and protective. She was diagnosed at age eleven. This helps to understand why she is different. She found the diagnosis very liberating and made her divergent. She can navigate the grown-up world.

**Q: Why did Charlie have a set of rules she adhered to?**

**Wendy:** It is a story about an autistic girl and how any person put in Charlie's situation would handle it differently based on their set of skills. The most important rule, "there are no rules when it comes to love." Love is a central theme to the book. The love between Charlie and her mom, between Charlie and her best friend Keller, and between Keller and her boyfriend Levi. Love is the one thing that throws off all the predictors. It causes all the other rules to fall away.

**Q: Can you talk about the role and influence of Charlie's mother?**

**Wendy:** She felt trapped, which is why she escaped from her parent's clutches. She tells Charlie how love would destroy her. She tries to be supportive. She was rejected by her parents. She applies the lessons of what happened to her to everything for Charlie. All her dreams were stolen and now she has no dreams. What is important to her and for Charlie

is getting out of their town, Sawyer and to focus on survival.

**Q: Many readers seem to lack sympathy for the victim. Can you elaborate on his character?**

**Wendy:** He is not a good person. He had a persona of what he wanted people to think of him versus his real persona. He was power hungry, greedy, lusted, and was not caring. He represents the bad things of this small town. He enjoys humiliating people and takes advantage of people. He is corrupt. He exploits his employees and takes away their dignity and self-respect.

**Q: Why did you incorporate the phrase, "lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and onions" in the narrative?**

**Wendy:** I worked in a sandwich shop at seventeen through college. The way the sandwich shop is described in the story is based on this shop. It was a chain called D'Angelos that have been around forever and puts those items on the sandwich. I had bosses who were sleeping with the teenage employees.

**Q: Can you give us a hint about your next book?**

**Wendy:** There will be an Audible book, an audio play titled *Mad Love*. I describe it as Dirty John meets the Tinder Swindler meets the psychological thriller. It takes place in a wealthy suburban town.

**Q: Are there plans to adapt this into a film or television series?**

**Wendy:** It has a TV series option. All my stuff had been optioned.

*Interview by Elise Cooper*



### Wendy Walker's latest: *American Girl*

This character study begins as a murder mystery that turns into a psychological thriller with elements of danger. It is a story of good versus evil and life versus death; about friendship between women as they solve the crime of murder.

The story begins when the owner of a sandwich shop where Charlie Hudson works is found murdered. Each member of the staff becomes a person of interest, except Charlie, who was hiding behind the counter. These people she works with have become her family, and she would go to any length to protect them.

Charlie is clever, thoughtful, resourceful, sensitive, and has developed coping mechanisms for her autism that allow her to function. With many twists and turns, readers will not want to put the book down.



# Crime-Solving Animals

The furry and feathered detectives of mystery fiction

Crime doesn't always call for a hardboiled detective with a penchant for whiskey and cynicism. Sometimes, the best sleuth for the job walks on four legs, or even flies. Whiskers, feathers, and a natural instinct for sniffing out the truth, animals in mystery fiction have carved out their own niche, often outwitting their human counterparts.

**T**he legacy of crime-solving animals is both rich and whimsical, stretching from the pages of classic literature to the glossy scenes of Hollywood. Take the inquisitive and adventurous cats populating Lilian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who...* series. These feline detectives, led by the Siamese Koko, have an uncanny ability to lead their human, Quilleran, to clues and crime scenes, often with a purr or a pounce that seems innocuous to the untrained eye. Braun's tales have charmed readers since the 1960s, proving that sometimes the softest detectives can tackle the hardest cases.

Then there's the intuitive and faithful canine companions. Dogs have been a staple in detective stories, their heightened senses making them natural-born sleuths. Consider the cunning and dedicated canine in Spencer Quinn's *Chet and Bernie* series, where Chet, the dog narrator, often understands the crimes better than his human detective partner. Through the eyes of man's best friend, the novels provide a fresh take on traditional mystery elements, all while wagging a tail and fetching the bad guys.

Nestled within the fog-draped streets of the city, the pawsteps of a German Shepherd named Max resonate against the backdrop of a baffling mystery. Max, a seasoned K9 detective with the Metropolitan Police, is the protagonist in *The Scent of Fear*, a tale that finds him and his handler, Detective John Avery, on the trail of an elusive burglar known as "The Ghost." With a series of high-stakes heists leaving the city's elite in a state of paranoia, Max's acute

sense of smell becomes the linchpin in a case that seems impenetrable to human logic. As Avery follows leads and interviews witnesses, it's Max's uncanny ability to decipher the intricate tapestry of scents left behind at the crime scenes that guides them through the city's labyrinthine alleys toward a truth shrouded in secrecy. With each sniff, Max edges closer to the burglar's identity, unraveling a deeper conspiracy that threatens to blur the line between the hunter and the hunted. This K9 mystery seamlessly blends the thrill of a police procedural with the unique perspective of its four-legged sleuth.

Then there's television, which has long understood the appeal of these furry detectives. The late 1970s and early 80s saw *Hart to Hart*, where Freeway, the low-slung canine sidekick, often had a nose for clues that human detectives missed. More recently, the cheeky and animated *Scooby-Doo* has been solving mysteries with his human gang for decades, proving that a Great Dane with an appetite for Scooby Snacks and an aversion to ghosts can also have an appetite for crime-solving.

But the animal kingdom's contribution to crime fiction isn't limited to the domesticated. Take the work of Harry Kemelman, whose *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late* features a stray cat playing a crucial role in the rabbi's investigation. Or the more direct sleuthing of M.C. Beaton's Hamish Macbeth series, where a wildcat named Sonsie is known for its ferocity and keen detection skills.

Parrots and other feathered friends have also pecked their way into detective fiction. The aptly named *The Cat, the Quilt and the Corpse: A Cats in Trouble Mystery* by



Leann Sweeney introduces us to a cat detective aided by a crime-solving parrot, combining sharp claws with sharp beaks to unravel the threads of a mystery.

The key to these animals' success as detectives is their unique perspective. They see the world differently, and in that difference lies their strength. They are observers unburdened by human bias, instinctively attuned to the unusual, and alert to discrepancies that humans might dismiss. In their world, the scent never lies, and the slightest rustle in the underbrush is a signpost to the truth.

Beyond the charm of these creatures is their accessibility. Animal detectives do not need a badge or a warrant. They cross thresholds and fences, enter spaces where humans might hesitate, and retrieve evidence with a tenacity that only a natural predator or an undetected observer can muster.

But what makes these furry and feathered detectives truly memorable is their relationship with their often all-too-human partners. Their interactions often highlight the human character's flaws, humor, and emotional depth. It's the combination of animal instinct and human intellect that creates a dynamic, almost symbiotic detective duo.

Even as they prowl, pounce, and purloin their way through crime scenes, these animals are complex characters. They aren't simply pets caught in a human drama; they are characters with their own arcs, personalities, and development. This is evident in the intricate plots of Rita Mae Brown's *Mrs. Murphy* series, where the titular tiger cat, along with her dog and human companions, solves crimes in the sleepy town of Crozet, Virginia. Mrs. Murphy is not merely a bystander to the human action; she is a fully realized character whose feline wisdom and courage often save the day.

This intricate portrayal of animal detectives in literature and screen has not only provided entertainment but has also subtly shifted perceptions of animals. These stories suggest

a depth of intelligence and an emotional range that might not be so fantastical. They remind audiences of the bond between humans and animals, a bond that, when woven into a mystery, becomes even more intriguing.

As with any good detective story, the joy is in the journey, not just the destination. And so it is with animal detectives. The solutions to their cases often take a backseat to the delightful antics and insightful interventions of the animals themselves. Their charm lies not just in the whodunit, but in the how-did-they-do-it, which invariably involves a dash of animal antics and a different kind of logic.

Sure, they may not always follow the rules—a dogged detective might dig up a garden, or a cat sleuth might knock over a few too many vases—but their contributions are invaluable. These animal detectives remind human characters and audiences alike to look at the world from a different angle, to pay attention to the small things, and to listen to those who don't use words to speak.

Their tales continue to resonate, spawning sequels and adaptations, and securing their place in the pantheon of mystery solvers. While they may not replace the classic trench-coated detective, they certainly earn their place alongside them, as they embody a truth known to any mystery lover: sometimes the keenest insight into the human condition comes not from our peers but from our pets.

In the landscape of mystery fiction, the presence of crime-solving animals adds a layer of whimsy and wisdom to the genre. Their tales are a testimony to the enduring appeal of the detective story, a genre that allows for innovation within its boundaries, creating a space where even a purring cat or a barking dog can lead us to a revelation. These animal detectives, in all their furry and feathered glory, prove that when it comes to solving crimes, it's not just the two-legged who have a knack for uncovering the truth.

# Weather in Thrillers

How storms, heatwaves, and natural disasters raise the stakes in some of the most gripping thrillers, both in literature and on screen.



**S**torms have long been a favorite among thriller writers and directors for their unpredictability and inherent danger. In *Shutter Island* by Dennis Lehane, a violent storm isolates the island, turning it into a pressure cooker of tension as U.S. Marshal Teddy Daniels investigates a disappearance from a fortress-like hospital for the criminally insane. The storm not only physically traps the characters but also mirrors the turbulent psychological landscape of the story. The adaptation directed by Martin Scorsese amplifies this, using the storm's ferocity to heighten the film's sense of claustrophobia and paranoia.

Heatwaves, too, have their place in the thriller genre, often symbolizing simmering tensions that threaten to boil over. Consider *In the Heat of the Night* by John Ball, where the sweltering Southern heat complements the racial tensions and the high-stakes murder investigation led by Virgil Tibbs, an African American police detective. The heat becomes a character in itself, oppressive and inescapable, mirroring the societal pressures within the story. The 1967 film adaptation uses the stifling heat to great effect, visually and thematically enhancing the narrative's intensity.

Natural disasters provide a larger-than-life backdrop against which human dramas unfold. *The Wave*, a Norwegian film based on the real-life threat posed by the Åkneset mountain, uses an impending tsunami to create a nail-biting race against time. This catastrophe serves a dual purpose: it's both a thrilling spectacle and a metaphor for the uncontrollable forces at play in our lives. The film masterfully combines family drama with disaster movie tropes, creating a unique thriller experience.

### INSIDE THE REAL STORM

The psychological impact of weather in thrillers cannot be overstated. In *Cape Fear*, both the novel by John D. MacDonald and its film adaptations, a hurricane

coincides with the climax, symbolizing the chaotic and destructive nature of the antagonist, Max Cady. The storm's fury externalizes the conflict between Cady and the Bowden family, culminating in a literal and metaphorical showdown. The 1991 adaptation directed by Martin Scorsese utilizes the storm's intensity to create a visceral sense of dread.

Weather also serves as a narrative device to isolate characters. In *Misery* by Stephen King, a blizzard traps novelist Paul Sheldon in the home of his "number one fan," Annie Wilkes. The snowstorm is not just a physical barrier; it's a metaphorical one, too, reflecting Sheldon's entrapment and Wilkes' detachment from reality. The 1990 film adaptation leverages the blinding whiteness of the snow to emphasize Sheldon's isolation and vulnerability.

It's not just about the physical threat of weather, but also its psychological implications. In *The Revenant*, both the novel by Michael Punke and the film adaptation, the relentless winter wilderness becomes a character in its own right, testing the limits of human endurance. The harsh environment shapes the story's tone, reflecting the protagonist's struggle for survival and revenge. The film's stark, frozen landscapes serve as a brutal backdrop to the narrative, underscoring the themes of isolation and resilience.

### A PLOT IS BREWING

Weather in thrillers often symbolizes the turmoil within the characters. In *A Simple Plan* by Scott Smith, a snowstorm is not just a backdrop to a plot about finding a downed plane with millions in cash; it reflects the moral disintegration of the characters as they succumb to greed and desperation. The cold, unforgiving landscape mirrors their emotional descent, making the weather an integral part of the story's fabric.

Furthermore, extreme weather can act as a catalyst for the story. In *The Perfect Storm*, both the non-fiction book by Sebastian Junger and its film adaptation, a confluence



of meteorological conditions leads to the catastrophic storm that challenges the fishermen of the *Andrea Gail*. The storm's immense power and unpredictability become the central focus, pushing the characters to their limits and providing a stark reminder of nature's dominance over man.

### NOT WHAT IT SEEMS

Lastly, weather can be used to subvert expectations in thrillers. In *The Shining*, both Stephen King's novel and Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation, the snowbound Overlook Hotel initially appears as a peaceful retreat. However, as the snow deepens, it becomes a trap, preventing the characters from escaping the hotel's

malevolent influence. The serene snowscape quickly turns sinister, reflecting the descent into madness of the protagonist, Jack Torrance.

Weather in thriller fiction is more than just a backdrop; it's a multifaceted element that can heighten suspense, reflect inner turmoil, and even become a character in its own right. Whether it's the oppressive heat of a southern summer, the chaotic fury of a storm, or the relentless cold of a winter blizzard, weather plays a pivotal role in shaping some of the most memorable narratives in the genre. It's an essential tool that thriller writers and filmmakers use to create atmosphere, develop plot, and explore character psychology.



**John Scalzi**  
*New York Times* bestselling author  
 whatever.scalzi.com

## John Scalzi

John Scalzi writes books, which, considering where you're reading this, makes perfect sense. He's best known for writing science fiction, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Redshirts*, which won the Hugo Award for Best Novel. He also writes non-fiction on subjects ranging from personal finance to astronomy to film and was the creative consultant for the *Stargate: Universe* television series. He enjoys pie, as should all right thinking people. You can get to his blog by typing the word "Whatever" into Google. No, seriously, try it.

**Q. Your latest book, *Starter Villain*, has been garnering a lot of attention. Can you tell us what inspired you to write it?**

**John:** I was inspired to write by the need to eat and pay my bills, which sounds cynical until you don't have food or electricity. Beyond that, however, I have always wondered about the practical issues surrounding "super villainy" as it's portrayed in films and fiction: How does one acquire minions? How do the governments of the world not know about these nefarious characters and their plans? Why do you need a volcano lair? So I wanted to come up with (reasonably) rational explanations for it all.

**Q. What does it mean to your protagonist to inherit his mysterious uncle's supervillain business?**

**John:** I think he's initially confused by it, which makes sense: if someone you barely know leaves you all his wealth and power, you're going to have questions, even if they are related by blood. Charlie is smart enough to know he's in over his head but also is curious enough to want to see where this all leads, which is a fun combination in a protagonist.

**Q. The relationship between heroes and villains is prevalent throughout the book. What message do you want readers to take away from this exploration of morality and the nature of villainy?**

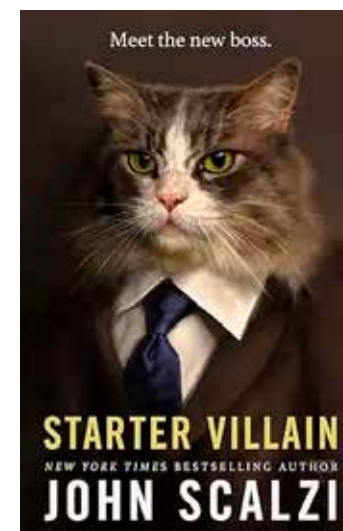
**John:** I'm less interested in overtly trying to offer a moral, and more interested in what, after reading the book, the readers come up with in their own heads. I think Charlie's own reaction to it all might not be one that readers expect, so I imagine there will be some discussion of that. Which: Good!

**Q. What was your favorite part of the writing process for *Starter Villain*? It was the cats, right?**

**John:** I mean, I sure liked writing the cats. But the scenes that were most fun for me to write were the ones with the dolphins. I think readers will understand why when they get to those scenes.

**Q. What are you reading now?**

**John:** *Gundog*, by Gary Witta. And then I'll be avoiding fiction for a while as I write the next novel; I don't want someone else's style leaking out of my fingertips as I type!



### John Scalzi's latest: *Starter Villain*

Charlie's life is going nowhere fast. A divorced substitute teacher living with his cat in a house his siblings want to sell, all he wants is to open a pub downtown, if only the bank will approve his loan.

Then his long-lost uncle Jake dies and leaves his supervillain business (complete with island volcano lair) to Charlie.

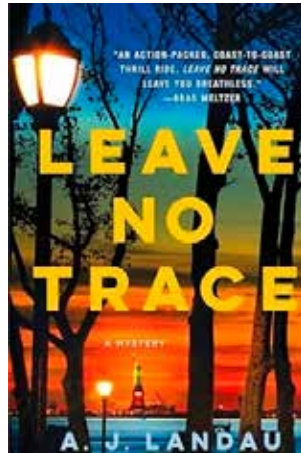
But becoming a supervillain isn't all giant laser death rays and lava pits. Jake had enemies, and now they're coming after Charlie. His uncle might have been a stand-up, old-fashioned kind of villain, but these are the real thing: rich, soulless predators backed by multinational corporations and venture capital.

It's up to Charlie to win the war his uncle started against a league of supervillains. But with unionized dolphins, hyper-intelligent talking spy cats, and a terrifying henchperson at his side, going bad is starting to look pretty good.

In a dog-eat-dog world...be a cat.



HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WINTER



**Leave No Trace**  
A. J. Landau

It's a beautiful day on Liberty Island, New York—until a sudden explosion rocks the air, toppling Lady Liberty, killing hundreds, and unleashing a new wave of terror across the United States.

Michael Walker, a special agent with the National Park Service Investigative Services Branch (ISB), and Gina Delgado, an assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's New York

field office, find themselves thrown together as they work to prevent further tragedy at America's major landmarks. But when your enemies could be anyone, how can they know who to trust—or where the next strike may be coming from?

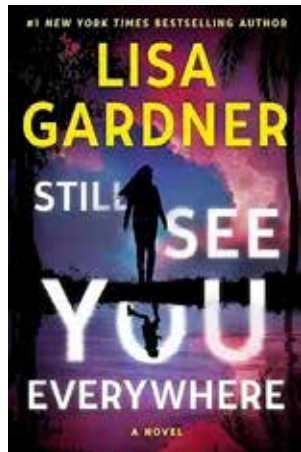
A.J. Landau, a writing team comprised of Jon Land and Jeff Ayers, has made quite the impression—when the first chapter of your first novel includes the Statue of Liberty collapsing due to a terrorist action, you're definitely letting your readers

know that you mean business. And you have to be able to follow up the shock and awe with a book that'll keep them hooked—luckily for us, they rose to the challenge.

It's clear that this book is well-researched—as a non-resident of the U.S., I actually really appreciate a little background information, and the parks and monuments visited in the course of the story were brought to life in a way that really helped me keep my bearings despite the action-fueled, tense pace. Gina and Michael were great characters whom I was able to care about quickly, and I'll admit—I'm more than a little intrigued by Gina's backstory, especially when it comes to her fascination with explosives. More than once, the story defied my expectations, too, in ways that surprised and pleased me—for example, how some of the brilliant guesses the protagonists made turned out to be wrong, or the way the plot included a grassroots environmentalist organization.

This was an action-filled, smart, and seriously readable thriller that I read in one sitting—there just wasn't a moment that felt right to put it down. A.J. Landau is off to quite the start, and I can't wait to see where we go with them next.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook



**Still See You Everywhere**  
Lisa Gardner

Frankie Elkin is an unusual woman. A recovering alcoholic, she feels guilty that her addiction caused the death of a man she loved. This guilt drives her to atone for her past by looking for missing people. She doesn't live anywhere in particular, moving from one case to the next.

Frankie has traveled to a Texan jail for female death row prisoners to meet Keahi

Pierson, a serial killer known for luring eighteen men to her home before feeding them to her pigs. Keahi is not repentant and wants to die, but before her execution in twenty-one days, she wants Frankie to find her missing sister, Lea.

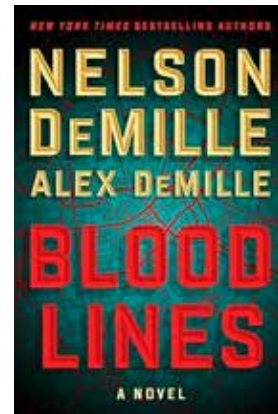
When she turned eighteen, Keahi took four-year-old Lea from their abusive father and ran away to relatives in Hawaii. Unfortunately, she fell in love with Sanders MacManus, who would fight violently with her. One day she woke up in the

hospital to find Lea gone and MacManus claiming she had run away. Unable to find any trace of her, she eventually began her killing spree. However, recently receiving a letter from Lea, she now wants to know that she is safe.

To find out if he has Lea, Frankie takes a job as a house keeper on Pomaikai, a small atoll near Honolulu that MacManus, now a tech billionaire, bought to develop. In her afterword, Gardner describes how she based her fictional island on Palmyra, an atoll she visited during a writing sabbatical. Subject to tropical storms, Pomaikai's isolation means it has to be self-sufficient, with food flown in regularly.

While the first half of the book sets the scene, fleshing out the characters and some troubling incidents of sabotage, it's like the calm before the storm. All hell is about to break loose after MacManus arrives, just ahead of a tropical storm that cuts them off from outside communication. A major, totally unique, out of left field twist ramps up the suspense to maximum. While over-the-top chaos ensues, Gardner takes us on a wild and crazy, action-packed ride that many of her fans will love.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



**Blood Lines**  
Alex DeMille & Nelson DeMille

Never underestimate the insane; they may be crazy, but they're not stupid. This phrase aptly describes several of the main protagonists encountered by Army Criminal Investigation Agents (CID) Scott Brodie and Maggie Taylor. This cinematic tour-de-force thriller marks the welcome return of this unconventional duo. Brodie is a blend

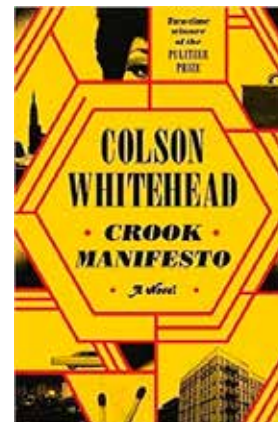
of James Bond and Rambo, endowed with wit and sarcasm, and is teamed with the equally dangerous and feisty Maggie Taylor, who is "tough as nails."

They have been apart for the last five months, following the successful yet controversial completion of their perilous mission to Venezuela to apprehend the infamous Army deserter, Captain Kyle Mercer of the elite Delta Force. They are tasked with investigating the murder of one of their own: CID Special Agent Harry Vance, a decorated counter-terrorism agent found dead in a city park in Berlin's Arab refugee community. Discovered lying on his back with a single bullet wound to his temple, his right hand clutching his Beretta in his coat pocket, and his left eye "scooped out," his cell phone was missing, but his wallet remained.

The reason for Vance's presence in Berlin is unknown, with no ongoing investigative case noted in available records. These two aggressive and rule-bending detectives have been enlisted to assist the alphabet soup of agencies deeply entrenched in the investigation. In addition to the German federal police and Berlin Police, the FBI, CIA, and State Department are supposedly collaborating with the U.S. military to circumvent the impending political and diplomatic storm. Brodie and Taylor find themselves navigating the complex socio-political landscape of modern Germany, uncovering clues and evidence overlooked by other agencies. At the heart of their investigation is the ongoing Arab refugee crisis, the dark legacy of the Cold War with ties to the Stasi secret police, and the looming threat of a resurgent neo-Nazi movement. Will the murder be conveniently attributed to Muslims, or is it a precursor to a more sinister future event?

This riveting sequel can be enjoyed as a standalone. The DeMille team proves themselves master storytellers, weaving a high-octane action thriller teeming with intrigue, tension, and suspense. As the narrative unfolds, the reader's anxiety escalates, with Brodie and Taylor traversing the dangerous streets of Berlin, embroiled in unraveling a convoluted tale of deceit and cunning. As nuanced conspiracies come to light, the identity of an American traitor is revealed.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



**Crook Manifesto**  
Colson Whitehead

*Crook Manifesto* opens with Ray Carney at work in his Harlem furniture store. Ray has much to be thankful for: the store is profitable; his healthy family loves him and, most importantly, he is out of the fence racket. Four years of not selling "hot goods" are four calm, peaceful years. The only issue dogging Ray is how to get tickets to the sold-out

Jackson 5 concert. May, Ray's teenage daughter, wants to see them "very, very, very much."

As a last resort, Ray asks the crooked, dirty, under-investigation cop Munson to help him get tickets. (We are on the sidelines at this point yelling, *DON'T DO IT—DON'T INVOLVE MUNSON!*)

In 1973 in Harlem, Ray is in his furniture store again. This time he is on the sidelines watching a film crew setting up for a shoot of a Blaxploitation film. Also on scene is Pepper, Ray's old friend, providing security. Filming is stopped when it is discovered that the star of the movie is nowhere to be found. Ray and Pepper now must tread through the turbulent, chan-

ging times where there are crooks large and small, cops on the take, the Serpico hearings, the mob, the Black Liberation Army, drug dealers, comedians, hustlers, corrupt politicians, and arsonists burning buildings for profit, all plying their trades and fighting each other.

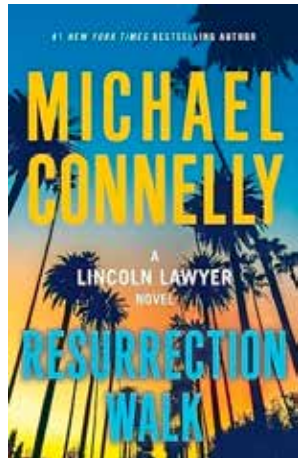
1976 is the Bicentennial year and Ray owns the building that houses his store, along with adjoining apartments. He and his family live on Strivers Row, Harlem's most prestigious address. His wife Elizabeth has been very successful at the travel agency. When a childhood friend announces a run for political office, Elizabeth joins his campaign.

But Harlem is burning. Arsonists, politicians, bankers, insurance companies, and city officials interact to line their pockets while poor citizens suffer. When one of Ray's tenants is severely injured in a "set" fire, Ray reacts. He calls upon Pepper to help him get to the truth about the fire. It is a disgusting trip through corruption.

Colson Whitehead writes beautifully but unobtrusively. Everything is logically placed, but there are still surprises. He is a master of calm reason that stirs you. Maybe his wry humor provides the buffer between the pain and sorrow his characters experience.

Reviewed by Jennifer Bradford





## Resurrection Walk Michael Connelly

Mickey Haller has experienced the feeling only once, but it's addictive, and he desperately wants to experience it again. The thrill of freeing an innocent victim of the criminal justice system, someone who has been falsely imprisoned, is incomparable.

The adrenaline rush was unparalleled when the victim, Jorge Ochoa, was finally cleared;

the prison doors were thrown open, and he walked out a free man to be greeted by his waiting family. Haller called it the "resurrection walk."

Haller is known in Los Angeles circles as the Lincoln Lawyer because he eschews the use of an office, preferring to store his case files in the trunk of his car. He's temporarily supported by his half-brother, ex-LAPD homicide detective Harry Bosch. Harry, suffering from bone cancer, has been enabled by Haller's employment to enroll in a clinical trial program at UCLA Med. Bosch's role is that of an investigator and also a part-time driver for Haller. He's overseeing the search for the next injustice case for Haller, sifting through the many letters sent to Haller after Ochoa's

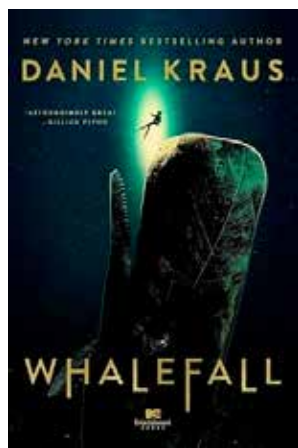
release. One case he presents to the lawyer involves Lucinda Sanz, who accepted a nolo contendere (or no contest) plea to avoid a potential life sentence. She was charged with killing her husband, a sheriff's deputy, five years earlier following a domestic dispute.

Through his novels, Connelly has crafted a world where his protagonists (currently Haller, Bosch, and Renee Ballard, a serving LAPD detective) coexist. Each has their own book series, but guest appearances in others' stories are common. This is predominantly a Lincoln Lawyer tale, with the court scenes being the prominent highlights. The narrative gives equal attention to both Haller and Bosch. Their relationship here differs from previous books: Haller is clearly the boss, and while they cooperate effectively, it's unusual seeing Bosch in this more subordinate role under the often brusque Haller. Bosch, having spent his entire career on the prosecutor's side, is conflicted about working for a defense lawyer.

No one crafts a crime fiction narrative quite like Connelly. Every action taken is logical and strategically positioned, reactions are authentically portrayed, and every character is thoroughly believable.

Being a Lincoln Lawyer story, it's anticipated they'll reach the courtroom, and once they do, it's a masterfully orchestrated legal dance.

Reviewed by Andrew Smith



## Whalefall Daniel Kraus

*Whalefall* is a complex, immersive, gut-wrenching story about the power of relentless perseverance and the will to survive. As a horror story, it's really good, but what elevates it to greatness is the emotional tale of a 17-year-old boy struggling to survive the aftermath of a severely dysfunctional father/son relationship that culminated with the suicide of

his overbearing father, leaving him drowning in overwhelming grief and guilt.

Thus, there are two fascinating stories of survival intertwined within these pages. Both stories are hypnotic, vivid, and bewitching, with lessons to be learned from each.

Jay Gardiner returns to dive in the deadly waters off Monastery Beach in a doomed attempt to recover the skeletal remains of his father from the sea that claimed him. If he can bring his father home, his mother and sister will forgive him—more importantly, Jay can finally forgive himself. As Jay descends to the ocean floor with only one hour of oxygen, he's consumed by memories of former dives with his

father and quickly gets lost in the dark labyrinths of his mind. Before he realizes it, he's swimming over a mile-deep abyss, the depths of which no man has ever explored. He becomes entangled in the tentacles of a giant squid being pursued by a sixty-ton sperm whale the size of a warehouse. When the whale swallows the squid, Jay is sucked into its mouth and swallowed, landing in the first of four stomachs. With nothing but his wits, the contents of the whale's stomach, and his father's voice in his head, Jay's battle for survival begins. One hour. The clock's ticking.

This is so much more than just a story of a boy surviving being swallowed by a whale. It's the emotional journey of Jay clawing his way from the dark, desolate depths of depression, despair, and grief that drew me in and held me captive. Kraus's writing is hypnotic and oddly soothing. Like Jay, I became mesmerized by the amazing visual canvas of the underwater world expertly painted by this talented author. As Jay's oxygen decreases and hallucinations set in, he is driven onward by his father's voice—*Sleepers, Arise!*

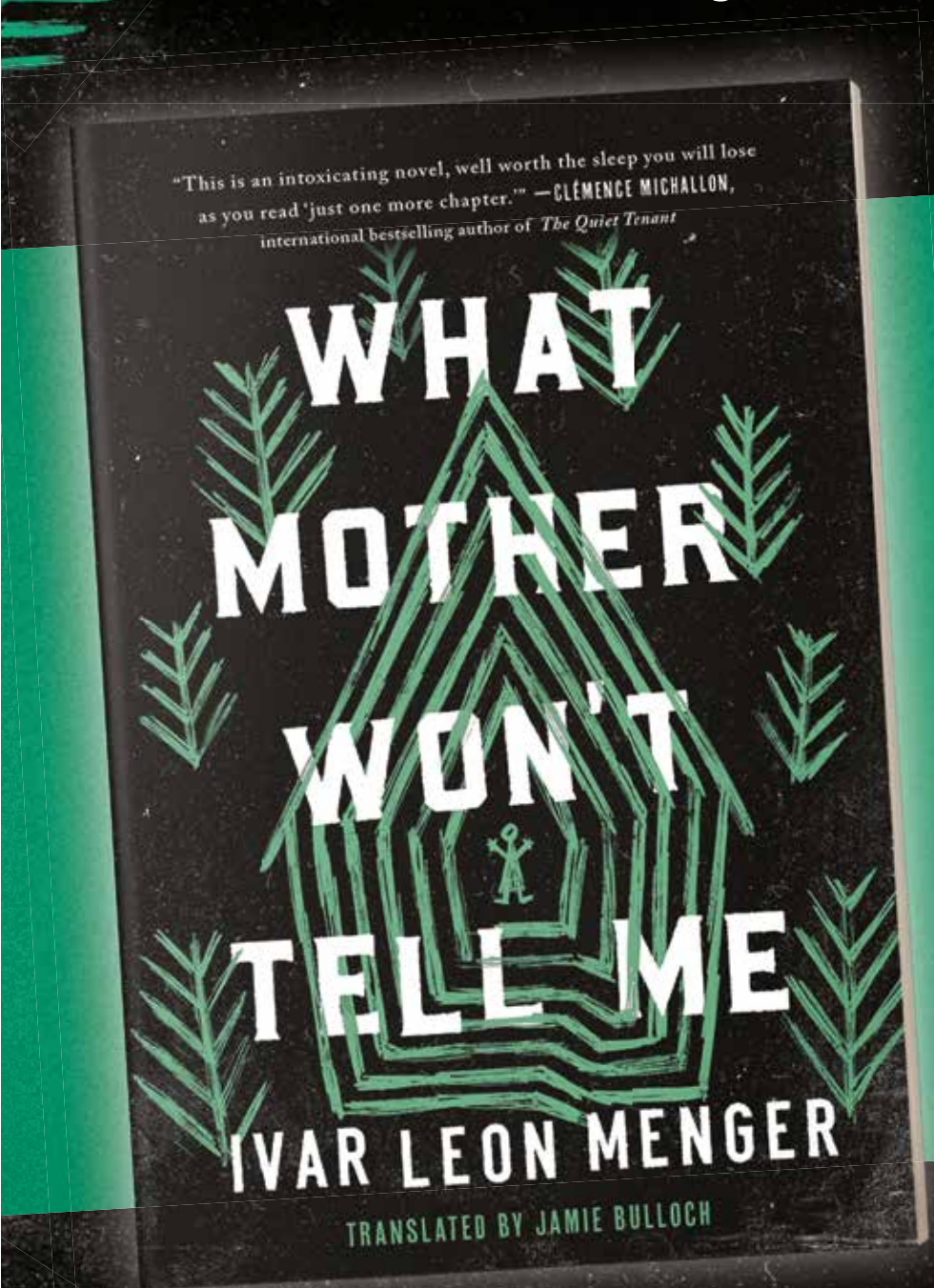
*Whalefall* is an emotionally laden, scientifically accurate study of the ocean, as well as the destruction of relationships caused by a dysfunctional family. Highly recommended to fans of suspense, horror, and beautifully rendered tales of redemption.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover

**“INTOXICATING.** Well worth the sleep you will lose as you read ‘just one more chapter.’”

— CLÉMENCE MICHALLON,

international bestselling author of *The Quiet Tenant*



**“TENSION LEAPS OFF THE PAGES.”**

— MARY BURTON,  
New York Times  
bestselling author

**“HAUNTING.”**

— JASON STARR,  
author of  
*The Next Time I Die*

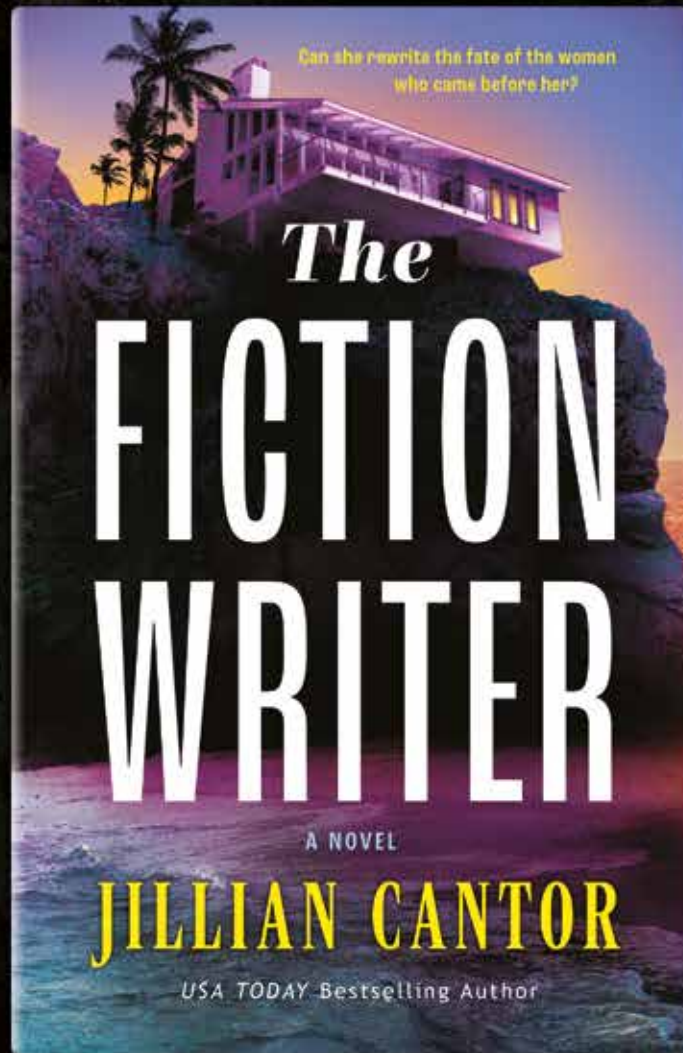
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## Leave the Lights On

Liv Andersson

When a small child goes missing, Beatrice Wicker takes notice. This child has a horrible way of reminding Beatrice of the issues within her marriage. While the hunt for the child and kidnapper continues, Beatrice remembers an event from her past that she hopes to keep secret. However, that secret could be revealed too soon, and the reason for the kidnapping may not be

what everyone is thinking.

Life in Cape Morgan, Maine, is as peaceful as it could be. Living in a massive home on the coast with her husband, Josh, there is nothing that Beatrice could want more. As she begins making plans to turn an abandoned asylum into a captivating art retreat, she is happy to see things coming to fruition. Nothing can derail her, even though Josh will occasionally sneak off to see his other family, something that no one knows about and Beatrice chooses to ignore.

While he thinks himself sly, Josh is completely unaware that Beatrice knows about his indiscretion. She is also harboring a deep secret, which has had her running from many of the small towns in which she has lived.

After an explosion leads to the disappearance of a young boy, the community is in a panic. Beatrice knows that this is Josh's son, but remains calm in hopes that he will admit the truth and be able to panic or grieve. Yet, Josh remains stoic, which only angers Beatrice.

The hunt to find little Oliver is exacerbated when a clue turns up outside the family home. As Beatrice tries to brush it off, she is left to wonder if her own secret is about to come out, which could force her to admit that she is not as pristine as she lets on. A struggle to find the boy, trap the kidnapper, and keep the truth from spilling out is all part of this thrilling psychological book that keeps the reader flipping pages.

Liv Andersson makes a glaring impact on the genre with a story that is well-constructed, strengthened by a strong narrative core. The plot keeps the reader on their toes as things take a turn for the worse. How will Beatrice face the truth of her past? Will Josh be able to play the role of protective father that he wants?

Reviewed by Matt Pechey



## The Blue Monsoon

Damyanti Biswas

This book is the sequel to *The Blue Bar*, but can be read as a standalone.

During monsoon season, Mumbai's torrential downpours, flooded streets, and swamped rail tracks clog parts of the city to a standstill. This makes the job of the police even harder, and Senior Inspector Arnav Singh Rajput must navigate flash floods and slosh through waterlogged streets

while investigating a heinous murder.

Rajput is called to the scene when a body is found in a Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess Ma Kaali. The murder victim is unrecognizable and the body has a tantric symbol drawn on his chest. To add to the desecration, gold jewelry—offered to the goddess by prosperous devotees—is missing from the temple safe.

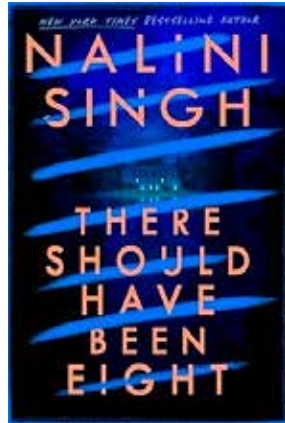
Rajput's investigative team includes Inspector Jivan Desai, a high-caste man who resents Rajput's rapid rise in the police department; and Sub-inspector Sita Naik, a low-caste woman who has a secret crush on her boss. Caste differences cause severe discrimination in Indian society, though Rajput, who's high-caste himself, wrongly thinks all that bigotry is a thing of the past. Thus Rajput is taken aback when snobby Desai tries to manipulate evidence to protect his high-caste peers while scapegoating low-caste individuals.

As Rajput's team investigates the homicide, video footage of the crime scene is released on the website of former Bollywood actress Chitra Varli. Chitra insists she was hacked, but Rajput isn't convinced. The video, along with other clues, lead the police to look at a variety of suspects, including Chitra; the priest at the Ma Kaali temple; a tantric practitioner; a thug who works for a Mumbai mafia don; the owner of a hair factory; and political activists trying to get low-caste candidates elected to government positions.

Mumbai during monsoon season provides a fine backdrop to this well-written thriller.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer





## There Should Have Been Eight

Nalini Singh

As a devoted fan of the Guild Hunter series, I couldn't wait to crack open Singh's first in the suspense thriller genre. This intense, locked-room mystery is set in a partially burned-out Gothic mansion in New Zealand during a storm that strands the cast with no contact with the outside world. We're talking secret panels and tunnels, mysterious

attacks, people who disappear, murder.

Nine years ago, eight teenagers were the best of friends until Bea, the girl everyone loved, died, and the group drifted apart. Bea's sister, Darcie, organizes a reunion of the seven remaining now-adults in her family's old, isolated mansion—an opportunity for the group to catch up with each other and reminisce.

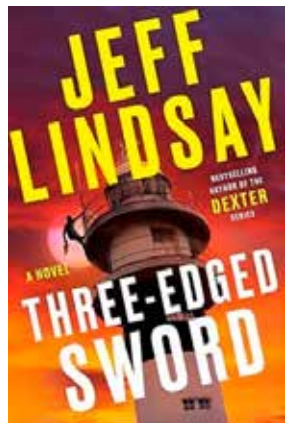
Luna, our narrator, is a photographer who's just learned that a genetic disease will steal her eyesight over time, a diagnosis she chooses not to share with the others. It's through her eyes and camera lens that readers learn about each of the others, along with their dark secrets. Luna hopes to gain

answers to troubling questions surrounding Bea's death as well as the shocking decision by Darcie to have her sister cremated before any of her friends could say goodbye. There's a lot of resentment, frustration, and rage festering between members of the group, and it's soon clear someone is seeking revenge. When a fall down the stairs results in one dead from a broken neck and a blizzard cuts off communication with the outside world, it becomes a game of survival. One of them is a murderer ... who is it?

This chilling, highly atmospheric Gothic suspense thriller keeps readers sifting through secrets, lies, and strange happenings. Singh excels at building intriguing, beautiful yet deadly worlds that take on the role of another character. Readers will find it nigh on impossible to put this book down as the pace and tension increase dramatically as members go missing or suffer mysterious accidents.

Strong characterizations, a tension-laden plotline, and a spooky setting are all conducive to a creepy whodunit. I'll admit to being surprised at the big reveal in an explosive climax, and I'm looking forward to seeing what else Singh will release in this genre. Highly recommended to fans of locked-room mysteries and suspense thrillers.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



## Three-Edged Sword

Jeff Lindsay

If you enjoy crime thrillers with humor, a twisty plot, and a protagonist who is a thief and a master of disguise, then look no further. This is the third book in the Riley Wolfe series. Riley uses his abilities to rob the richest. However, this time a rogue government agent has abducted the only two people Riley loves. If he doesn't do what is requested,

there will be severe consequences. He must infiltrate a missile silo, enter a vault, and steal a flash drive within a limited amount of time.

Riley lacks the qualities of many conventional heroes and is flawed. While his morals aren't the typical ones we would associate with a protagonist, he is courageous, adept at disguise, and truly cares for the two people being held hostage. He doesn't trust others easily, typically works alone, and needs risk in his life. But is this task the one that breaks him? Readers of the series will have met some of the secondary characters, but there are also a few new ones to keep the story fresh and interesting.

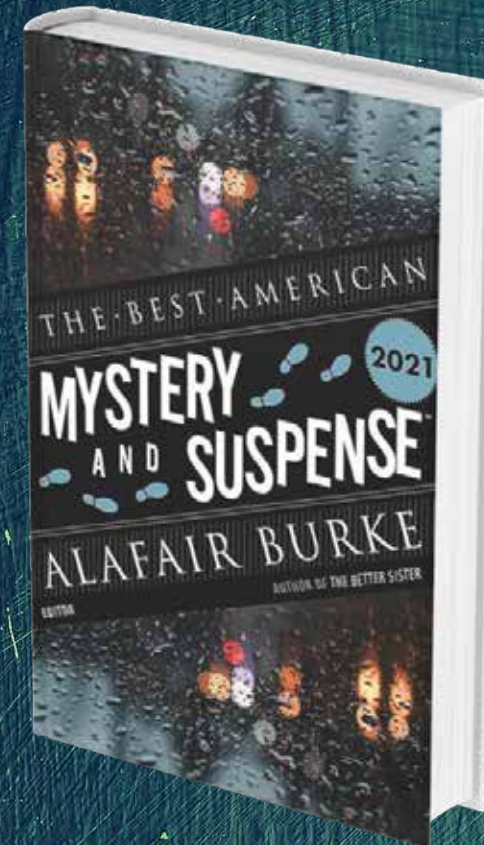
An exciting plot, some over-the-top action scenes, excellent character development, and descriptive settings made this an enjoyable read. The settings ranged from Botswana to South Africa to Lithuania to Germany to various locations in the United States, with the majority set on an island in Lithuania. The world-building made it easy to visualize everywhere Riley went.

The author's writing style hooked me quickly and drew me into this exciting and suspenseful tale. The conflict and unexpected twists kept me turning the pages. There is an unsettling and disturbing scene near the end. Several themes run through the story, including theft, patriotism, love, friendship, death, threats, and how people are treated and how that can affect their actions.

Overall, this is a fast-paced and entertaining thriller with some humor to break the suspense occasionally. This series is best read in order, as there is a small spoiler in this one for previous books in the series.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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