

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

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MAGAZINE

SUSPENSE IN THE CITY

Mysteries set in
New York City

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**Author Q&As: Lisa Unger, Amina Akhtar,
Iris Yamashita & A. J. Landau**
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**Feature: The Irresistible
Suspense of Secret Networks**

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**Feature: 8 Bookstores that
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Exclusive author interviews.
Features full of secrets.
The suspense is almost killing us.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

This quarter's edition of the magazine is imbued with extra thrills. At the heart of the suspense might be the enigmatic setting of our feature story: none other than New York City. This global nexus of book publishing not only serves as the location of excellent mysteries and thrillers, it's a melting pot of cultures, histories, and secrets waiting to be uncovered.

The suspense of this issue could equally stem from our exclusive author interviews. We delve into the minds behind this season's most captivating tales, featuring conversations with Lisa Unger about her thrilling novel *The New Couple in 5B*, Amina Akhtar discussing the suspenseful *Almost Surely Dead*, Iris Yamashita shedding light on *Village in the Dark*, and the dynamic writing duo A. J. Landau—Jon Land and Jeff Ayers—who unravel mysteries in *Leave No Trace*.

Alternatively, the suspense of this edition may reside within its compelling features. We explore the suspense of secret networks, revealing the shadowy realms that operate just beneath the surface, and the suspense of time, an exploration of the ticking clock at the heart of so much excellent fiction.

No matter what elements of suspense capture your imagination, this quarter's edition promises to transport you into a world where mystery reigns supreme.

Happy reading,
Sam

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8 Bookstores that Specialize in Mysteries

What's better than a local bookstore? How about a local bookstore that focus exclusively on the mystery and suspense genre?

BY JC GATLIN

Looking for something special in mystery fiction? These specializing bookshops have stocked their shelves with detective, cozy, crime, hardboiled, thrillers, espionage, suspense, and everything in between. In addition to selling books, they've creating communities where mystery lovers can connect, share their passion for the genre, and discover their next favorite author.

So, put away your magnifying glass. No need to hunt for clues. You're now on the trail of eight mystery and suspense bookstores across the country.

MYSTERY INK

Huntington Beach, California
www.mysteryink.com

Mystery Ink Bookstore not only specializes in the mystery genre, featuring a diverse inventory from classics to current best sellers to autographed signed first editions, but they also specialize in mystery author events. Over the past 20+ years, they've hosted signings for many best-selling authors, including Michael Connelly, Jeffery Deaver, T. Jefferson Parker, Rhys Bowen, and Cara Black.

"We have numerous author talks/signings with the authors when their new novels come out, which enables readers direct contact with the author," says Mystery Ink owner Debbie Mitsch. "Readers have the chance to ask the authors questions and find out whatever they would like to know about their new books."

Debbie provides books for many outside events, including the Ladies of Intrigue Conference, the Literary Guild of Orange County, UCR-Palm Desert's bi-yearly MFA Writers conferences, and annual fundraising luncheons for several different libraries. She is also a regular participant at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books.

"I believe people love mysteries due to having a chance at escapism; being able to get lost in a book to solve the mystery and have a satisfying ending that doesn't usually happen in real life," Debbie adds. "I, personally, have always loved a good mystery."

MYSTERY LOVES COMPANY

Oxford, Maryland
www.mysterylovescompany.com

Mystery Loves Company is a bookshop for "Scribes of the Shore." With a fully stocked store and "warehouses" containing over 30,000 books, they offer an in-depth collection of mysteries, both new and gently used in hardback and paperback.

"Neil Gaimen said a town without a bookstore is not a town. I believe that towns should have a bookstore as their nexus," says Kathy Harig, bookseller and owner of Mystery Loves Company. Originally founded in Baltimore in 1991, the shop moved to the 360-year-old waterfront village of Oxford in 2006. Still, it remains the only bookstore specializing in mysteries in the Baltimore-Washington area and from New Jersey to Florida. "Because there is no other independent bookstore, we sell everything. But our heart is in mysteries," Kathy says.

They frequently host author signings and sponsor special mystery events. "We believe in supporting local authors, nurturing them, as well as bringing in the bestselling mystery authors when we can," Kathy adds. "Our author events often partner with local inns, restaurants, libraries, historical societies, churches, community colleges, and writers groups."

In addition to publishing a monthly email newsletter of events, recommendations, and new mystery titles, they can create mystery gift baskets with books and related items, mugs, and other goodies. "Our mission is to match the person to just the right mystery," Kathy says. "I love what I do."

UNCLE EDGAR’S MYSTERY BOOKSTORE

Minneapolis, Minnesota
www.unclehugo.com

Uncle Edgar’s Mystery Bookstore (along with Uncle Hugo’s Sci-Fi Bookstore in the same building) just celebrated their 45th Anniversary. It’s an anniversary that was well-earned, as the shop recently re-opened after their previous location was destroyed in the 2020 riots. “After the fires burnt down the building, which was built in 1917, and we lost both stores, we rebuilt the space into one large space, so it’s now one shop stop for both mystery and sci-fi,” says owner Don Blyly.

Back in business, Uncle Edgar’s welcomes mystery readers of all stages, well-read to just getting started. Even though there’s two sides to the business, the Uncle Edgars staff knows the mystery market, according to Don, and can make recommendations for any mystery reader.

The store has a storied past, so to speak. After launching the successful sci-fi bookstore in 1974, Don saw an opportunity to expand. “People thought Uncle Hugo’s was a great concept but kept asking if we’d do the same thing for mysteries,” he explains. “I tried to talk some other people into that idea with no luck, so when a space opened up next door to us, I went ahead and took it and started the mystery store. The sci-fi store took off, but it took about three years for the mystery store to even break even, but we hung in there. Sci-Fi had local groups for us to get the word out when the store opened and we had to rely on word of mouth for the mystery side.”

THE CLOAK AND DAGGER

Princeton, New Jersey
www.thecloakanddagger.com

Located just a short walk from Princeton University, The Cloak & Dagger is in a 100-year-old Colonial-revival home renovated to reflect an English style library. “(It’s) the atmosphere of a small ‘library setting’ like one would find in an English manor home, or dare we say, like a drawing room in an Agatha Christie mystery,” says proprietor Jerry Lenaz.

The Cloak & Dagger stock primarily new mystery paperbacks that cover all mystery genres, along with mystery gifts and collectibles, mystery audiobooks, videos, puzzles and games. “There’s nothing like a good mystery to tickle your puzzle-solving grey cells,” Jerry adds. “Matching wits with Hercule Poirot, Sherlock,

Flavia de Luce, Ian Rutledge of Scotland Yard, Inspector Gamache from Quebec and, well the list goes on, is one of the greatest forms of aphrodisiac available. Sure, great works of literature have a heady appeal. But a solid mystery that keeps you turning pages until the denouement moment where the perpetrator is revealed is such fun.”

THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP

New York City, New York
www.mysteriousbookshop.com

Opened in 1979, The Mysterious Bookshop is the oldest mystery fiction specialty store in America. “Our store has that classic, old-time bookshop feel with floor to ceiling bookshelves and cozy atmosphere,” explains store manager, Ryan Lee Gilbert. “There’s nothing like it any longer.

Mysterious Bookshop stocks new mystery hardcovers, paperbacks, and periodicals, as well as features a superb collection of signed modern first editions, rare/collectible hardcovers and Sherlockiana. “Our staff is made up of mystery and true crime readers, and they love talking about the genre, not just in books but also films and TV shows. People come in looking for recommendations and our staff can always suggest something,” says Ryan.

The shop’s unique “Bibliomystery” series features novellas by some of the biggest authors in the genre, written exclusively for their store. Updates to this series, along with book clubs, signings, and events are included in their weekly newsletter. “We host a lot of author events throughout the year, giving readers the chance to meet their favorite authors,” adds Ryan. “Plus we have eight different monthly book clubs that are subgenre specific. Members get a 1st edition hardback copy of the book being read.”

MECHANICSBURG MYSTERY BOOKSHOP

Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania
www.mysterybooksonline.com

Mechanicsburg Mystery Bookshop has been operating for over 32 years, selling new and used books, as well as book accessories, t-shirts, hats, movies, puzzles, gift baskets, gift boxes, and gift bags.

“I thought it would be great to have a bookshop that was focused on a wide range of mysteries. And I was very fortunate to be able to do just that, with the style of

books that are very dear to my heart,” says owner Debbie Beamer, who has been a fan of mysteries ever since she read her first Nancy Drew book.

Debbie and her team have a goal to introduce customers to new and exciting authors every day and provide events for the community to expand their literature knowledge.

“We host a variety of events throughout the year, maintaining the pace of one a month with the help of our dedicated volunteers and staff,” Debbie says. “Some of our events include: our annual Murder As You Like It Mystery Conference in August, our newly added annual Cozy Mystery Fete in October, and our annual Author Showcase around November/December. We also host three monthly book discussion groups and our P.R.O.M.M. evening events on scheduled Wednesdays. Along with Book Release Launches, individual author events, and drop-by signings, we try to keep a very active author presence for our loyal customers.”

MYSTERY LOVERS BOOKSTORE

Oakmont, Pennsylvania
www.mysterylovers.com

Located just 20 minutes east of downtown Pittsburgh, Mystery Lovers Bookshop has been an independent bookstore specializing in the mystery genre for 33 years. “We have some readers that have been coming to us for that long,” says store owner, Tara Goldberg-DeLeo. They carry over 6,000 titles, including thrillers, noir, suspense, and cozies, too. “People come here to find popular mystery titles along with UK imports, established series, and some of the classics,” adds Tara.

Founders Mary Alice Gorman and Richard Goldman were nominated for a Bookseller of the Year Award by *Publishers Weekly*, received the Bookseller of the Year Award from Berkley Books, and recognition for Excellence in the Arts from *Pittsburgh Magazine*. In 2010,

Mystery Lovers Bookshop received the Raven Award from the Mystery Writers of America in recognition of their contribution to the world of mystery writing. The store was voted as *Pittsburgh Magazine’s* Best of the Burgh Independent Bookstore in 2019.

“Mystery readers are a loyal group and once they find a character, or setting they love, they stick with them through everything,” Tara says.

MYSTERY TO ME BOOKSTORE

Madison, Wisconsin
www.mysterytomebooks.com

Next to the Monroe Street Branch library, Mystery to Me specializes in mystery and suspense to differentiate themselves from other local bookstores. They like to call themselves “a general bookstore with a specific name.”

“Our mystery section is very carefully curated and provides depths to series,” says Joanne Berg, owner of Mystery To Me Bookstore. “We like to introduce debut mystery authors as well as classical mystery stories to our customers.”

Other than a great selection of books, Mystery to Me hosts a wide variety of author and book-related events. “We’re active with many local reading groups,” adds Joanne. “We support and participate in the Wisconsin Book Festival, we actively engage in the Madison Reading Project to get hands into the books of young kids, and we bring in authors from around the globe (virtually and in-person).”

Even though their store stocks all types of book genres, the mystery genre is still their favorite. “I’m always amazed when people say ‘I’ve never read a mystery...’ I like to take the opportunity to talk with them about all of the different aspects of what makes a mystery,” Joanne concludes. “After all, isn’t every book a mystery if you don’t know how it ends?”



About the author

JC Gatlin is a mystery-suspense author with Millford House Press, the fiction imprint for Sunbury Press. His newest book, *Darkness Hides*, was published in 2021, and his 2019 mystery *H_NGM_N: Murder is the Word* won “Gold – Top Mystery or Crime Fiction” at the Florida Royal Palm Literary Awards. His indie mystery-suspense novel *21 Dares* went to #1 on Amazon’s Top Mystery Suspense and Top Young Adult charts. JC lives in Tampa, Florida and is a member of the Florida Writers Association and a board member of the Florida Writers Foundation.



Lisa Unger
New York Times bestselling author
lisaunger.com

Lisa Unger

Lisa Unger is the *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author of twenty novels, including her latest, *Secluded Cabin Sleeps Six*. With books published in thirty-three languages and millions of copies sold worldwide, she is regarded as a master of suspense.

Unger’s critically acclaimed novels have been featured on “Best Book” lists from *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *People*, *Amazon*, *Goodreads*, *L.A. Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Sun Sentinel*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and many others. She has been nominated for, or won, numerous awards including the Strand Critics, Audie, Hammett, Macavity, ITW Thriller, and Goodreads Choice. In 2019, she received two Edgar Award nominations, an honor held by only a few authors, including Agatha Christie. Her short fiction has been anthologized in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense*, and her non-fiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, and *Travel+Leisure*. Lisa is the current co-President of the International Thriller Writers organization. She lives on the west coast of Florida with her family.

Q. I’m always fascinated by the sources of your inspiration for new books. What inspired *The New Couple in 5B*?

Lisa: The inspiration for *The New Couple in 5B* was a little more winding than normal. My late aunt was a very glamorous Manhattanite. She worked in fashion and lived in what, to me as a young person, was the iconic New York City apartment on Park Avenue—hardwood floors, flooded with light, with a stunning views. But she was a complicated woman, and our visits to her beautiful space, in an elegant pre-war, elevator man building, were fraught. I always felt some combination of awe, admiration, and horror. My aunt has passed, and the apartment was sold long ago. But it has lived on in my memory. More recently, I re-read Ira Levin’s stellar, gripping *Rosemary’s Baby*. And somehow the idea of a struggling young couple inheriting an apartment they weren’t sure they could afford to keep in a building full of secrets took hold. It’s not a retelling of that story, of course. But there are some things—the coveted building, the creepy neighbors, the young, complicated marriage—that I was eager to explore in my own way. So *The New Couple in 5B* is kind of a twist of those two sources of inspiration.

Q. The Windermere seems like a character in itself. Can you talk about the process of creating such a detailed and atmospheric setting?

Lisa: The Windermere is absolutely a character in the novel. Some combination of my childhood memories, my imagination, and my fascination with the iconic buildings of New York City, it was as alive for me as Rosie and Chad were. I used my memories and my research to create a place that is part true, and part fictional. I think that’s true of most of my novels, particularly those set in New York. There’s a New York City that belongs only to me—some union of the place I imagined and fantasized about as a kid, the place I inhabited as a student and a young publishing professional, and the one I experience now when I spend time there again. The Windermere typifies that energy for me—hyper-real, and totally fictional all at the same time.

Q. The dynamic between Rosie and Chad is central to the story. How did you approach writing their relationship amidst the backdrop of a thriller?

Lisa: Marriage is such an interesting tangle. Rosie and Chad each brought a lot of baggage into the life they share together. They’re very different; she’s an introvert, he’s an extreme extrovert. She’s very bookish. He’s an extremely handsome actor over whom women tend to swoon. And yet somehow they’ve built something together, love each other deeply, support each other through the challenging moments of their lives. I don’t view their relationship as a backdrop to

the thriller; I view it as the central component. What brings us together? How and why do we choose each other? What secrets do we keep from those we love? What do we hide from ourselves? I find those questions fascinating, and uncovering all Rosie and Chad’s layers was an important driver for me as a writer, and I hope for the reader, as well.

Q. What first drew you to the thriller genre, and how did your passion develop over time?

Lisa: I have always had a slightly twisted imagination, and have turned to the page to metabolize darkness. I think most thriller writers seek to order the chaos they perceive in the world by writing fiction. Probably most thriller readers come to the page for the same thing. Crime fiction is a crucible. When we meet people under extreme pressure, we often see them as they really are. I consider myself a spelunker, shimmying into the dark spaces of the human psyche to see what’s there. Crime fiction (or mystery, or thriller, or psychological suspense) provides a perfect canvas to explore why people do what they do, ask and answer questions about human nature, and maybe even conceive of some kind of justice in a world where it seems in short supply.

Q. What’s next?

Lisa: I am in the middle of revisions on my next novel. I am not quite ready to talk about it yet. But suffice it to say it’s a thriller, and bad things will happen! Stay tuned for more ...



Lisa Unger’s latest: *The New Couple in 5B*

Rosie and Chad Lowan are barely making ends meet in New York City when they receive life-changing news: Chad’s late uncle has left them his luxury apartment at the historic Windermere in glamorous Murray Hill. With its prewar elegance and impeccably uniformed doorman, the building is the epitome of old New York charm. One would almost never suspect the dark history lurking behind its perfectly maintained facade.

At first, the building and its eclectic tenants couldn’t feel more welcoming. But as the Lowans settle into their new home, Rosie starts to suspect that there’s more to the Windermere than meets the eye. Why is the doorman ever-present? Why are there cameras everywhere? And why have so many gruesome crimes occurred there throughout the years? When one of the neighbors turns up dead, Rosie must get to the truth about the Windermere before she, too, falls under its dangerous spell.

The Irresistible Suspense of Secret Networks

Secret networks are rich minefields: They make us question which players are the good guys, especially if even one nefarious actor among them is willing to bend the rules and do bad things.

BY JESSICA STRAWSER

We know, we know: The first rule of Fight Club is: You don't talk about fight club. It's part of our lexicon now: We're all in on the joke. But the idea that a club like that could exist? That there's a place behind closed doors where everyday people become something else entirely, playing by different rules—adopting a shared ethical code of their own?

We might not talk about it, but we sure do like to read about it. And there's no rule against that.

I've been fascinated by books about secret networks for as long as I can remember. Who among us hasn't been swept away by the secret societies of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, spellbound by the idea of all those symbols hidden in plain sight—from renowned artwork to revered chapels, from the museums of France to the sacred grounds of Scotland—through generations of protectors? Who hasn't been on the edge of our seats devouring accounts of the Underground Railroad, including Colson Whitehead's masterpiece Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name, which imagines literal train tracks run by brave conductors beneath the Southern soil?

I live in Cincinnati, where the Ohio River once marked the boundary to the North, and the town remains full of historical markers and museums that pay homage to the passengers and those who helped them to safety. Walking in their footsteps, you can still feel the tension, the fear, the risk, the determination to do the right thing, the will to survive. For every heartbreaking story is another one that captures the imaginations of visitors of all ages—with the against-the-odds, in-your-face reminders that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary things.

It's a testament to the best—and worst—of human nature that the historical mystery shelves are especially full of secret networks. Just when we think we know World War history, we can see it anew through the eyes of unsung Resistance heroes—think of Kristin Hannah's French sisters who each has her own way of resisting Nazi occupation in *The Nightingale*, and Kristin Harmel's based-on-a-true-story heroine who forged new identities for fleeing Jewish children in *The Book of Lost Names*. Just as harrowing are the stories of spies—particularly the women recruited to serve as secret agents abroad, brought to breathless life in page-turners such as Kate Quinn's *The Alice Network* and Pam Jenoff's *The Lost Girls of Paris*.

The fact that so many such titles are based on real life helps pave the way for countless more wonderful novels that are pure imagination, allowing us to suspend our disbelief and buy in. You know the ones: The youthfully mischievous *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, full of brainteasers for adults and children alike from the imagination of Trenton Lee Stewart. The conflictually feminist social club in Laura Hankin's *A Special Place for Women*, where a coveted invitation might involve certain unspoken expectations. And right back where we started with Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.

For writers, this is a free-for-all: No historical research required, very few parameters to follow, a blank slate to imagine your own players, draft your own mission statement, and make your own rules. For readers, it's fun to believe it could happen—not in history, but right now—along for the

ride as we explore the endless possibilities of the age-old question: What if...?

And yet doesn't all imagination have a basis in reality?

As both a novelist and a lifelong reader, I've always preferred characters who are shades of gray. I find it's truer to life that way, because very little in this world is as black-or-white as it may seem: Protagonists have flaws; antagonists have soft spots. When it comes to a good thriller, part of the thrill—and dare I say the fun—is not knowing which characters we can trust. Maybe that's part of what makes secret networks such rich minefields: They make us question which players are really the good guys here, especially if even one nefarious actor among them is willing to bend the rules and do bad things. We instinctively know to be wary of double agents.

I find it disturbingly easy to imagine unsavory characters walking among us. We see them every day in the headlines, and their baffled neighbors interviewed on the local news: *He seemed like such a normal guy*. Maybe that's why I prefer to imagine the everyday superheroes who don't wear capes. The ones who don't need our nation to be at war to find a cause they care about.

For example, in my new novel, *The Last Caretaker*, I dreamed up an everywoman fresh off a divorce who is looking for a fresh start. She finds one as resident caretaker on a nature reserve. It comes complete with a furnished farmhouse, and all she has to do is move in and keep an eye on things. Until a woman in distress shows up at her doorstep in the middle of the night, clearly expecting a safe place to hide. And it's suddenly clear caretaking involves more than she bargained for. Which makes her wonder why the job was open in the first place ... since no one seems to know what happened to the last caretaker.

I've always been intrigued—and properly awed—by murmurs of “whisper networks” who help women in dangerous situations escape abusive men and assume new identities in new locations far away. I've always wondered how they really work. And the truth is, I still don't know.

But it sure was fun dreaming up a cast of characters who did.



About the author

Jessica Strawser is editor-at-large at *Writer's Digest* and the author of domestic suspense and popular book club fiction, including the Book of the Month bestseller *Not That I Could Tell*. Her latest, *The Last Caretaker*, released in December. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times* "Modern Love," *Publishers Weekly*, and other publications. She lives with her husband and two children in Cincinnati, Ohio, and loves connecting with readers on Facebook and Instagram at @jessicastrawserauthor. Learn more at jessicastrawser.com.

HIDING YOUR CULPRIT IN PLAIN SIGHT

Crafting the perfect mystery isn't just about weaving a web of intrigue and suspense. It's also about the art of misdirection, a skill that some of the greatest literary and cinematic minds have mastered. Let's embark on a journey through the annals of mystery and crime fiction to uncover how the best in the business have hidden their culprits in plain sight, without resorting to clichés or the usual suspects.

One timeless tactic is the use of the “unreliable narrator.” This device has been employed to great effect in literature, keeping audiences guessing until the final reveal. Consider the case of Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the narrator, who is also the murderer, uses sleight of hand in storytelling to mislead the reader. This technique challenges the audience’s perceptions, making them question the reliability of the storyteller.

Another approach is the “seemingly innocuous character.” This character often appears unassuming, blending into the background. Yet, as the story unfolds, their true nature is revealed, catching the audience off guard. A classic example is the mild-mannered pharmacist in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” His unremarkable demeanor initially deflects suspicion, only to shock readers with a dark turn.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Then there’s the “hidden in plain sight” method, where the culprit is a prominent character whose guilt seems too obvious to be true. This technique plays on the audience’s expectations, leading them to overlook the character because they seem too apparent a choice. Think of the charismatic leader in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, whose overtly suspicious behavior is initially dismissed by readers as too blatant to be genuine.

Screen adaptations have also masterfully employed these techniques. The art of camouflage in plain sight was brilliantly showcased in the movie *Primal Fear*, where a seemingly traumatized and innocent character is eventually revealed as the mastermind. The film plays on the audience’s sympathies, using them to mask the character’s true nature.

RED HERRING

The “red herring” is another tool often used to distract and mislead. By introducing seemingly important clues or characters that are ultimately irrelevant, writers can lead audiences down a rabbit hole, away from the true culprit. Alfred Hitchcock, known as the master of suspense, frequently used red herrings to great effect in his films, keeping audiences on their toes and guessing wrongly.

Sometimes, the setting itself serves as a cloak for the culprit. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the bleak, foggy moors of England create an atmosphere of mystery and fear, obscuring the villain’s identity and motives until the very end.

SMOKESCREEN PLOTS

But it’s not just about the who; the how also plays a crucial role in concealing the culprit. The intricate plotting in *The Westing Game* by Ellen Raskin involves a complex web of clues and false leads that keep the reader engrossed and puzzled. The complexity of the plot itself acts as a smokescreen, hiding the culprit until the opportune moment.

Another technique is the “layered mystery,” where multiple smaller mysteries build up to the main revelation. This method is seen in *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, where a series of mysterious events at a medieval monastery distract from the main mystery, effectively hiding the culprit amid a maze of red herrings and dead ends.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Character transformation is yet another effective disguise. In *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane, characters evolve throughout the story, revealing different facets of their personalities. This transformation keeps the audience guessing about their true nature and intentions, effectively masking the real perpetrator.



TWIST ENDING

Lastly, the “twist ending” serves as the final flourish in hiding the culprit. A well-executed twist can turn the entire narrative on its head, revealing that the least likely character was responsible all along. This technique, seen in the movie *The Sixth Sense*, relies on the element of surprise to conceal the truth until the very last moment.

The art of hiding a culprit in plain sight is a delicate balancing act. It requires a deft hand to plant clues, craft engaging characters, and lead the audience astray, all while keeping the final reveal both surprising and satisfying. These examples from literature and film demonstrate the

diverse ways in which this can be achieved, each offering a unique spin on the classic mystery narrative. The key lies in understanding human psychology, playing on expectations, and always staying one step ahead of the audience.

In the realm of mystery and crime fiction, the thrill of the chase and the shock of the unexpected are what keep audiences coming back for more. The ability to masterfully hide a culprit in plain sight is what separates the good mystery writers from the greats. Whether through clever narrative devices, complex plotting, or psychological manipulation, the art of misdirection remains a cornerstone of this genre, captivating and bewildering audiences in equal measure.



Amina Akhtar
Mindy's Book Studio author
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Amina Akhtar

Amina Akhtar is a former fashion writer and editor. She’s worked at Vogue, Elle.com, Style.com, NYTimes.com, and NYMag.com, where she was the founding editor of *The Cut* blog. She’s written for numerous publications, including *Yahoo Style*, *Fashionista*, *xoJane*, *Refinery29*, *Billboard*, and for brands like Bergdorf Goodman and H&M’s *10 Years of Style* tome. After toiling in the fashion ranks for over fifteen years, she now writes full time in the desert mountains, where she’s detoxing from her once glam life. *Fashion Victim* was Amina’s first novel, followed by *Kismet*.

Q. What can you tell us about the inspirations for the supernatural aspect of the book and how your Desi culture influenced the story?

Amina: I grew up with a dad who loved telling me about jinn stories. Our family had personal experiences with them so he would really tell us them at night. He also had us all watch *The Exorcist* when I was four, and when I got scared he told me it was fine because he knew how to do exorcisms. Dad! I know. I also sleepwalk, and I wanted to write the creepiness of sleepwalking into a book.

Jinn are such a part of life in some areas that it’s almost shocking how little they’ve taken hold in pop culture here.

Q. Dunia has some similarities to Ronnie from *Kismet*—both characters come from challenging Desi family backgrounds, are deeply insecure and are trying to find their ways in the world in career and life, in spite of their up-bringsings. What can you share about the origins of these characters?

Amina: I think when you’re a child of immigrants, you can feel like you’ve got a foot in both worlds and perhaps don’t belong to either fully. It’s definitely something I struggled with myself. I didn’t think I was Desi enough to tell these stories until I figured, well, why can’t I tell them? So my characters always feel like an outsider. Same with Anya in my first book, who wasn’t Desi. It’s that sense of wanting to belong but you don’t.

I was always a bit of the black sheep and growing up in a community where you stand out can be bad. This was pre-internet days because I’m old. I think finding your people has become much easier with social media, but I like to pull on that sense of loneliness for my characters.

Q. Both *Kismet* and *Almost Surely Dead* have overbearing friends who at first seem too good to be true to the reader, and then they are. Do these storylines come from any real-world experience?

Amina: I’ve definitely met people who were inspirations for those characters. I’ve learned to give them a wide berth in my personal life.

Q. Is *Almost Surely Dead* a mystery, a thriller, a ghost story? Horror? A mash-up?

Amina: All of the above! It has elements of all of those things and more. I think it’s good to blur lines of genres, makes writing and reading more fun.

Q. Fashion, beauty, and wellness have threads running through the storylines of all of your books; what can you share about your experience working as a fashion editor?

Amina: I worked in the fashion industry for almost two decades, so it’s definitely a part of my story. And because I know it well, it’s an easy career to use for characters. Though Dunia is pharmacist in this one, so I hit up my sister, who is a PharmD. But I wanted her friend Kendra to be more glamorous.

Q. You satirize the true crime podcast craze in your book. And the podcast also becomes a key storytelling aspect of the novel. Why was this of interest and importance to you?

Amina: We’ve all seen the way true crime has taken our culture by storm. But who owns the story? The person it

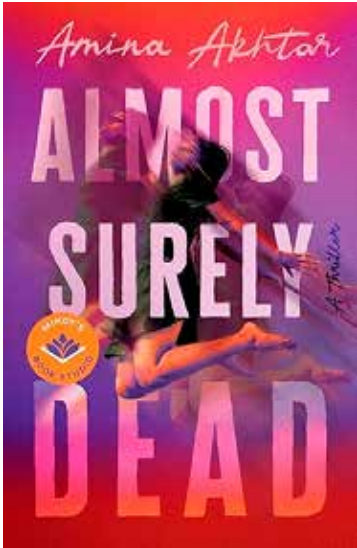
happened to/involved in the crime or the people telling the story? There are some fantastic true crime podcasts by lawyers and real investigators (I’m thinking of Rabia Chaudry and Catherine Townsend, respectively). They are trying to tell a story and solve a case and help the people involved. But there are so many others out there who just want to score a deal with Netflix or something, and don’t care about the folks they’re telling stories about. I think it’s a very fine line to tread when it comes to podcasts.

Q. What do you hope readers take away from reading *Almost Surely Dead*?

Amina: I think it’s about time the wider American audience discovered jinn and the many, many, many stories we all have about them. But hopefully more Muslims will be the ones telling the stories. These are our stories and culture, we need to be the ones telling them. I hope the powers that be in publishing see the reaction people have to this book and give pub deals to more authors of color. There are so many stories out there that the wider audience hasn’t even heard of yet.

Q. What’s next for you?

Amina: I’m working on my next book, which will dive into the world of Desi weddings and the obsession to get married. With murder, of course.



Amina Akhtar’s latest: *Almost Surely Dead*

Dunia Ahmed lives an ordinary life—or she definitely used to. Now she’s the subject of a true crime podcast. She’s been missing for over a year, and no one knows if she’s dead or alive. But her story has listeners obsessed, and people everywhere are sporting merch that demands “Find Dunia!”

In the days before her disappearance, Dunia is a successful pharmacist living in New York. The daughter of Pakistani immigrants, she’s coping with a broken engagement and the death of her mother. But then something happens that really shakes up her world: someone tries to murder her.

When her would-be killer winds up dead, Dunia figures the worst is over. But then there’s another attempt on her life...and another. And police suspect someone close to her may be the culprit. Dunia struggles to make sense of what’s happening. And as childhood superstitions seep into her reality, she becomes convinced that someone—or something—is truly after her.

New York Mysteries

New York City, a melting pot of cultures, dreams, and, yes, mysteries. This metropolis known for its iconic skyline and bustling streets has served as the backdrop for some of the most intriguing and suspenseful mystery fiction in literature and film. Let's delve into the labyrinth of New York mysteries, where the city's unique character adds a distinct flavor to the tales of intrigue and suspense.

HIGH SOCIETY

One cannot discuss New York mysteries without mentioning the classic *The Thin Man* by Dashiell Hammett. This novel set in the Prohibition era introduces us to Nick and Nora Charles, a sophisticated couple who solve crimes with wit and a martini in hand. The story’s blend of murder mystery and witty banter was a hit, leading to a successful film adaptation in 1934, directed by W.S. Van Dyke, capturing the essence of New York’s high society and its dark underbelly.

GRITTY STREETS

Another gem is Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. Though not entirely set in New York, its influence on the genre and depiction of the city’s gritty streets is undeniable. The novel’s hard-boiled detective, Philip Marlowe, became the archetype for many New York detectives in fiction, a tough, no-nonsense character navigating the city’s complex social and criminal landscape.

THE GILDED AGE

The Alienist by Caleb Carr, set in 1896 New York, combines historical detail with a riveting plot. It follows Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, a criminal psychologist, or “alienist,” as he

investigates a series of gruesome murders. The novel paints a vivid picture of New York’s Gilded Age, bringing to life the city’s contrasting worlds of opulence and poverty. Its adaptation into a television series in 2018 further showcased New York’s historical backdrop and its potential for dark and gripping narratives.

MODERN DAY

Not all New York mysteries are rooted in the distant past. Consider *1st to Die* by James Patterson, the first in the Women’s Murder Club series. This contemporary thriller introduces a group of women—a detective, a reporter, an assistant district attorney, and a medical examiner—who team up to solve crimes. Set in the modern-day city, the series captures the relentless pace and diversity of New York, offering a fresh perspective on the detective genre.

WEST COAST TWIST

On the silver screen, *Chinatown*, although primarily set in Los Angeles, pays homage to the classic New York detective story. Its protagonist, J.J. Gittes, portrayed by Jack Nicholson, embodies the classic New York detective’s traits—cynicism, toughness, and a relentless pursuit of the truth, set against a backdrop of urban corruption and moral ambiguity.



NEW YORK AT NIGHT

Another notable mention is *Night at the Museum*, a family-friendly mystery adventure set in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. This film, while not a mystery in the traditional sense, captures the wonder and mystery of one of New York’s most iconic institutions, turning it into a magical playground after dark.

COURTROOM DRAMA

For those who prefer their mysteries with a side of legal drama, *Presumed Innocent* by Scott Turow is a must-read. Set in Kindle County, a fictional locale inspired by New York City, this legal thriller follows prosecutor Rusty Sabich as he navigates a complex murder case. The novel’s success led to a film adaptation in 1990 starring Harrison Ford, bringing the story’s tension and courtroom drama to life.

CRIME AND JUSTICE

In the realm of television, *Law & Order*, created by Dick Wolf, deserves a special mention. This series, with its iconic “dun-dun” sound, became synonymous with New York City. Its formula of dividing episodes between police investigation and courtroom proceedings captured the city’s rhythm and complexity, offering viewers a gritty, realistic portrayal of crime and justice in New York.

New York City, with its endless maze of streets and its towering skyscrapers, continues to inspire writers and filmmakers, serving as the perfect setting for tales of mystery and intrigue. From the speakeasies of the Prohibition era to the modern-day courtrooms, the city’s ever-evolving landscape provides an endless backdrop for stories that capture the imagination. Whether through the pages of a novel or the scenes of a film, New York’s mysteries remain as captivating and unpredictable as the city itself.



Iris Yamashita
Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and novelist
irisyamashita.com

Iris Yamashita

Born in Missouri, raised in Hawaii and having lived in Guam, California, and Japan, Iris Yamashita was able to experience a diversity of culture while growing up. She studied engineering at U.C. San Diego and U.C. Berkeley and also spent a year at the University of Tokyo studying virtual reality. Her first love, however, has always been fiction writing, which she pursued as a hobby on the side.

Her big break came when she was recruited to write the script *Letters from Iwo Jima* for Clint Eastwood. It was named “Best Picture” by both the National Board of Review and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. It received a Golden Globe award for “Best Foreign Language Film” of 2006 and was nominated for four Oscars, including “Best Picture” and “Best Original Screenplay.”

INTERVIEW BY SANDRA HOOVER

Q. What motivated you to venture into the literary world as a novelist? How did your experience as a screenwriter help (or hurt) you make the transition to novelist?

Iris: I come from a screenwriting background and was hired by Clint Eastwood to write the World War II film *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which was nominated for a few Academy Awards, including “Best Original Screenplay.” It was definitely a highlight of my career. However, I found that I was being pegged as the Asian historical writer, and this was a genre that is very difficult to get produced. I really wanted to break out of the box, so I have been switching media forms. I wrote a musical stage play that was a fantasy, which had a run at Tokyo DisneySea, and writing novels has allowed me to venture into writing contemporary mysteries.

I think learning the craft of writing screenplays has undoubtedly helped me become a better writer. Since screenwriters have a union, there are contract minimums regarding pay and benefits, such as healthcare, if you earn a certain amount in a year. It also doesn’t take as long to write a screenplay as it does a book. The cons are that you have less ownership of the work and less say in the product. It is also much harder to get a script produced because of the amount of money and people involved.

Books are, for me, more fulfilling because of the ability to write completely original material instead of working off of someone else’s intellectual property, vision, or idea. It also doesn’t take multiple millions of dollars and a large crew to

see a finished product. It’s always disheartening when you feel like you’ve written a good script, but because there isn’t enough financing, no one will ever see your work. The hard part about books, however, is trying to rise above the two million other books that come out a year.

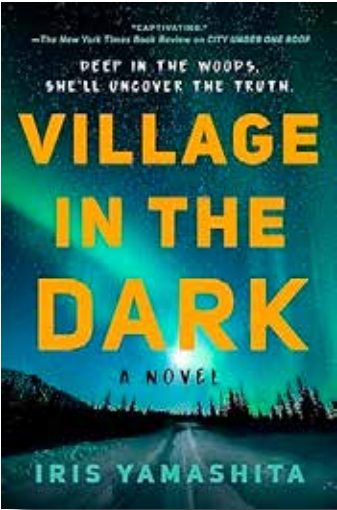
Q. *Village in the Dark* is the sequel to your award-winning debut novel, *City Under One Roof*. Talk about the significance of the title to the novel. Did you plan from the onset to write a sequel, or did it happen as characters developed in book one?

Iris: *Village in the Dark* refers to an off-the-grid village town that one of the main characters was raised in and decides to leave. While the place is physically dark, metaphorically, it represents the character’s lack of knowledge of the outside “Man’s World.” She grows up here in a kind of innocent, idyllic life, but as an adult wants to venture out and “eat from the fruit of knowledge,” so to speak, which corrupts her in a way.

I had planned to write a sequel from the outset as I had a two-book deal. However, I didn’t know whose voices I was going to use other than Cara’s. I realized Ellie had more story to explore while writing the first book and Mia didn’t really materialize until later.

Q. The harsh, deadly Alaskan setting plays a key role in both books with a brutal yet beautiful landscape, including a two-and-a-half-mile claustrophobic tunnel as the only way in or out of the city. Was your choice of a secluded, isolated setting motivated by any one place you’ve been?

Iris: I don’t know if it directly influenced my choice, but maybe subconsciously the island of Guam where I lived for four years helped shape the idea of being stuck somewhere, especially from the teen’s perspective in the first book. I lived on the 210-square-mile island when I was a teen and there was no internet back then, so despite being a beautiful island to visit, it felt like a very isolated, boring place to live in at that age.



Iris Yamashita’s latest: *Village in the Dark*

On a frigid February day, Anchorage Detective Cara Kennedy stands by the graves of her husband and son, watching as their caskets are raised from the earth. It feels sacrilegious, but she has no choice. Aaron and Dylan disappeared on a hike a year ago, their bones eventually found and buried. But shocking clues have emerged that foul play was involved, potentially connecting them to a string of other deaths and disappearances.

Somehow tied to the mystery is Mia Upash, who grew up in an isolated village called Unity, a community of women and children in hiding from abusive men. Mia never imagined the trouble she would find herself in when she left home to live in Man’s World. Although she remains haunted by the tragedy of what happened to the man and the boy in the woods, she has her own reasons for keeping quiet.

Aided by police officer Joe Barkowski and other residents of Point Mettier, Cara’s investigation will lead them on a dangerous path that puts their lives and the lives of everyone around them in mortal jeopardy.

For research, I visited Whittier, Alaska and stayed in the high-rise that inspired the story. The view from the rooms in summer was gorgeous, but I don’t think I’d want to be there in the winter. I watched videos and read articles to give me a sense of the place, but my residents are completely fictional and not based on any real persons in Whittier.

Q. *Village in the Dark* has one of the most unique, outrageous (in the best possible way) casts I can ever recall meeting. One might say it’s a community of misfits, oddballs, and eccentric recluses one can’t help but love.

Iris: That’s a perfect descriptor of the cast. In the first book, I imagined that the single lane tunnel was akin to a physical rabbit hole that Alice falls through and leads to a crazy Wonderland full of odd characters, and I just kind of ran with that. It’s hard to pick one character as a favorite, but I enjoyed writing Ellie’s POV. She’s a tough old lady with a checkered past. In my *Alice in Wonderland* analogy, she’s the madcap Queen of Hearts who kind of rules over Point Mettier. In *Village in the Dark*, I’ve continued the tradition of *Alice in Wonderland* references, but this time a lot of them are taken from *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

Q. Why was it important for you to tell this story? What do you hope readers remember long after reading *Village in the Dark*?

Iris: Part of it is bringing attention to the violence against women, particularly among the indigenous population. Another is the exploration of women-led communities and what that might look like.

I think we writers are supposed to raise questions and not necessarily have the answers. I don’t want to give too much away, but one of the questions I wanted to raise is whether we are living in an “everything-for-sale” society, whether it’s religion, politics, love, hate, and even our blood? And how do we move away from that? Again, I don’t have the answers, just the questions.



The Suspense of Time

Time, that relentless, ever-ticking entity, has long been a vital cog in the machinery of suspense fiction. It's the invisible antagonist, the constant pressure, and the ultimate deadline that characters race against, often with their lives hanging in the balance. This piece dives into the fascinating world of ticking clocks and racing heartbeats in suspense fiction, highlighting how time shapes narratives, characters, and, ultimately, the readers' pulse rates.

Bestsellers like *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown and *Before I Go to Sleep* by S.J. Watson use time as a crucial element. In *The Da Vinci Code*, protagonist Robert Langdon is in a relentless race against the clock to solve a murder and uncover a historical secret that could change the face of Christianity. The urgency is palpable, and time is not just a theme but a character in itself, pushing the narrative forward at a breakneck pace.

Similarly, in *Before I Go to Sleep*, Christine wakes up every day with no memory of her past. The novel unfolds day by day, with each passing moment a race for Christine to piece together her life before her memory resets. Here, time is both an enemy and an ally, a paradox that Watson masterfully exploits to keep readers on the edge of their seats.

AMPLIFYING SUSPENSE

Screen adaptations, too, have masterfully used time to amplify suspense. Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* is a stellar example. The protagonist, Roger Thornhill, finds himself in a deadly game of cat and mouse, with time running out to clear his name from a murder he didn't commit. Hitchcock, known as the master of suspense, used time to heighten anxiety and urgency, crafting scenes that linger in the mind long after the credits roll.

Or consider *24*, the television series starring Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer. Each season unfolds over twenty-four hours, with each episode representing an hour in real time. The real-time format adds a layer of intensity and immediacy to Bauer's efforts to thwart terrorist plots and save lives. The constant awareness of the ticking clock creates an atmosphere so thick with tension, viewers can almost feel the seconds slipping away.

HEROES ARE MADE

In suspense fiction, time is more than just a backdrop; it's a catalyst that propels characters into action, forces tough decisions, and reveals true natures. When characters are pressed for time, their decision-making processes are distilled to their essence, often leading to raw, revealing moments. This is when heroes are made, and villains are unmasked.

Moreover, the concept of time in these narratives often mirrors our own experiences with time in the real world. The relentless march of time, the pressure of deadlines, the anxiety of running late—these are feelings everyone can relate to. When these elements are woven into a suspenseful plot, they strike a chord with readers and viewers, making the experience more immersive and personal.

But it's not just about the race against the clock. Time in suspense fiction can also be about waiting, about the tension that builds with inaction or delay.

This is evident in stories where characters are waiting for an inevitable event, like a heist or a showdown. The buildup, the anticipation, can be just as gripping as the event itself.

STORIES OUT OF ORDER

Authors and screenwriters have also played with the concept of time by using non-linear narratives or flashbacks to create suspense. By revealing events out of order, they keep readers and viewers guessing, piecing together the story bit by bit. This manipulation of time adds a layer of complexity and intrigue to the narrative, engaging the audience's intellect as well as their emotions.

Time in suspense fiction is a multifaceted tool used by authors and screenwriters to build tension, drive narratives, and engage audiences. Whether it's a ticking bomb, a race to solve a mystery, or the slow build-up to a dramatic event, time is an essential ingredient in the recipe for suspense.

As these stories show, when handled with skill, the ticking of a clock can be as thrilling as any car chase or fight scene. So, next time a character glances at a clock, remember, it's not just about telling time; it's about setting the stage for a heart-pounding adventure.



Jon Land
USA Today bestselling author
jonlandbooks.com



Jeff Ayers
Fiction reviewer and author

A. J. Landau

A.J. Landau is the pen name of co-authors Jon Land and Jeff Ayers.

Jon Land is the *USA Today* bestselling author of fifty novels, including his Caitlin Strong series and several titles of the well-known *Murder, She Wrote* series. Jon often bases his novels and scripts on extensive travel and research, as well as a twenty-five-year career in martial arts. His books have won numerous prestigious awards. Jon is a graduate of Brown University, lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and can be found on X at @jondland.

Jeff Ayers has been a freelance writer and reviewer since 1999. He has reviewed for *Library Journal*, where he is a former Fiction Reviewer of the Year, for *Booklist*, and for *The Associated Press*. In addition to publishing several titles in both fiction and nonfiction, including *Voyages of Imagination: The Star Trek Fiction Companion*, Jeff is a Co-Executive Director of ThrillerFest, the annual conference for the International Thriller Writers.

Q. What was your primary inspiration for writing *Leave No Trace*, and why did you choose to focus on an attack on the Statue of Liberty?

Jon: Our inspiration was America’s ongoing love affair with the country’s National Parks. Using those parks as a backdrop for a thriller series seemed to have a huge built-in audience. So, we consciously chose to theme a series in which the setting functions as a kind of character in its own right. We opened the book with the attack on the Statue of Liberty because it’s almost certainly the most enduring symbol of everything America stands for. So attacking it would be like stabbing the country in the heart, which tells us a lot about the villains right from the start.

Q. How did you research for your protagonist, Special Agent Michael Walker?

Jon: First off, we thought making Michael a special agent with the Investigative Services Branch of the Park Service, kind of like their version of the FBI, was the perfect choice because it flowed directly from the notion of basing the series in national parks.

Jeff: As a lover of national parks since I was a kid and a fan of action thrillers, I kept looking for a slam-bang storyline with that setting. The majority are one park and one mystery. I wanted to change that, and Jon agreed. With Michael’s character and background established, I started visiting parks and asking questions of the rangers. I learned so much and even had an opportunity to be a ranger for a day and shadow an ISB agent. They also provided great feedback on the story, helping ensure we got the details as accurate as possible.

Q. How was it to work with your co-writer, Jeff Ayers? And how did you come up with your pseudonym?

Jon: The pseudonym was all Jeff, and it felt right to me as soon as I heard it. We’ve been friends for a whole bunch of years and had long mused about working together on something. Working with him made for a fantastic process, because we complement each other perfectly, and both of us are well aware of our strengths and weaknesses. Jeff’s mastery of research and

his contacts inside the Park Service meant that all I had to focus on was the writing itself. Beyond that, you don’t realize how much goes into the launch of a potential bestselling series until you’re in the middle of it. Having Jeff run point on all the promotional efforts and communications freed me to tackle the multitude of other projects I’ve got going, while never giving short shrift to *Leave No Trace*. Most important of all, though, was how much we went back and forth and challenged ourselves to write not just a good or great thriller, but an outstanding, seminal one. I might have done most of putting the words to paper, but we developed every major plot point together.

Q. The partnership and tension between Agent Walker and FBI’s Gina Delgado are central to the narrative. What did you want to explore with this dynamic, and how did you aim to differentiate it from other law enforcement partnerships?

Jon: Wow, great question! First, we wanted to create characters who were very distinct and yet were joined by the common bond of overcoming the odds and having a proclivity for pursuing their missions relentlessly, even if that meant going rogue a bit. They’re both insiders who feel more like outsiders, not rebels so much as individuals who can work within or outside the system. That creates a strong dynamic between them based on mutual respect without ever approaching anything resembling romantic attraction.

Q. Readers familiar with your work will be pleasantly surprised by a cameo appearance by a beloved character, lifted from another series, who they haven’t seen in over a decade. Why do that?

Jon: The whole notion emerged organically after we introduced a sub-hero who ended up getting his own POV and subplot. Making him the nephew of that character you’re alluding to felt right as a kind of payoff to my most ardent fans who’ve stuck with me through thick and thin for decades. It’s kind of like Clive Cussler appearing as a character in his own books, or Alfred Hitchcock doing a cameo in all of his movies, and

it has the added effect of giving the reader something to look forward to in every book, which further helps distinguish our thriller series from the glut of others out there. In one sense, I’m kind of committed now to having a different past character appear in each book in the series, but only if I can find an organic way to do so that makes sense and doesn’t feel stuck in there for its own sake.

Jeff: As a fan of Jon’s thrillers for over thirty years, I loved having that cameo be a perfect fit, and I can’t wait to see who pops up next.

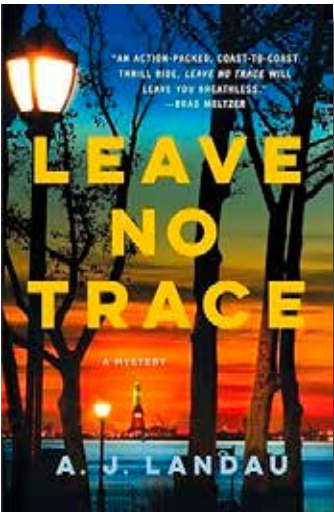
Q. The title *Leave No Trace* can be interpreted in several ways. What does it signify for you?

Jeff: The original title I was showing Jon was *The 63*, which is the number of National Parks. The Park Service oversees over 420 sites of historical monuments and lands vital to our nation’s history, but the crown jewels are the 63. I was visiting Acadia National Park and saw a sign that said, “Leave No Trace.” I immediately stopped and took a photo. I knew that preserving the scenery around me as much as possible so future generations could have the same experience was critical. That challenge was necessary for every visit to any park. When I told Jon, he immediately agreed we had our title.

Q. What’s next?

Jon: Ah, my favorite question! We’ve just begun writing the second book in the series, currently titled *Glacier Bay*, in which the action will be centered in Alaska, to a large degree at Glacier Bay National Park. What excites us most about this one is how different it is from our first effort in the story and the setting. We wanted to avoid the been-there-done-that, same thing, only different approach. So *Glacier Bay* is nothing like *Leave No Trace*, except for the presence of Michael and Gina, and a vast looming threat that, in this case, promises a global catastrophe. Did I get your attention? Ha-ha! Jeff?

Jeff: The research for this has been a blast! No pun intended.

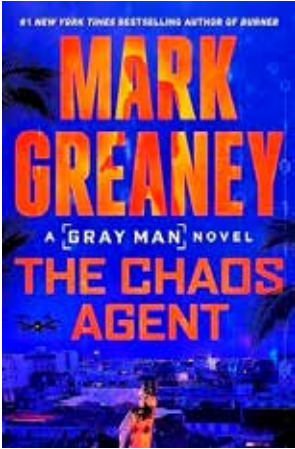


A. J. Landau’s latest: *Leave No Trace*

In a daring, brutal act of terrorism, an explosion rocks and topples the Statue of Liberty. Special Agent Michael Walker of the National Park Service is awakened by his boss with that news and sent to New York as the agent-in-charge. Not long after he lands, he learns two things—one, that Gina Delgado of the FBI has been placed in charge of the investigation as the lead of the Joint Terrorism Task Force and two, that threats of a second terrorism attack are already being called into the media. While barred from the meetings of the Joint Task Force for his lack of security clearance, Walker finds a young boy among the survivors with a critical piece of information—a video linking the attackers to the assault.

As a radical domestic terrorist group, led by a shadowy figure known only as Jeremiah, threatens further attacks against America’s cultural symbols, powerful forces within the government are misleading the investigation to further their own radical agenda.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SPRING



The Chaos Agent
Mark Greaney

Mark Greaney brings together a contemporary topic, diverse characters, multiple settings, and plenty of action in the thirteenth novel in the Gray Man series. In this latest book, artificial intelligence leads to a shocking and alarming scenario.

Someone is killing the world's leading experts on artificial intelligence and robotics. Is it a tech company eliminat-

ing the competition, a country intent on military superiority, or something even more ominous?

Court Gentry and Zoya Zakharova have assumed new identities and are living together in Guatemala. Both have governments and individuals as their enemies and are trying to keep a low profile. Unfortunately, that is about to change. They're tracked down and offered a job by an acquaintance of Zoya's. Despite rejecting the offer, being seen with him is enough to have assassins pursue them. On the run they

realize that whoever wants them dead seems to be one step ahead of them. It's time to fight back.

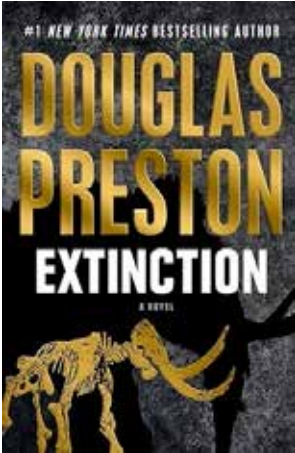
Court, a former CIA operative, is drawn to danger, misses making an impact, and suffers from insomnia. Zoya is motivated by causes and mainly wants to survive.

Greaney is an excellent storyteller who kept me on the edge of my seat with gripping scenes, action, a superb plot, and fantastic writing. In preparation for this series, he not only traveled to multiple countries but trained extensively in the use of firearms, battlefield medicine, and close-range combative tactics. The dynamic plot came alive and felt all too possible with real-world issues around artificial intelligence incorporated into the story.

A constant sense of urgency, a state of uneasiness, and lots of action combined with great characters and a well-written plot make this suspenseful novel a must read. Themes include artificial intelligence, industrial espionage, differing political and social ideologies, and much more.

Overall, this is a gripping, gritty, and chilling story with complex characters. It's intense and dramatic and kept this reader turning the pages. I recommend this series to those who like political, action, and military thrillers.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Extinction
Douglas Preston

Every evening, guests at the Erebus Resort in the mountains of Colorado gather to watch "de-extincted" Pleistocene animals like woolly mammoths, giant armadillos, rhinoceros-like indricotheres, giant ground sloths; Irish elk; and giant beavers. The luxury resort, a kind of Disneyland for rich people, comprises a magnificent lodge in a valley surrounded by rugged, mountainous terrain.

Honeymooners Olivia and Mark Gunnerson—who happens to be the son of a tech billionaire—stay at the lodge for a few days before they embark on an eight-day guided hike along Erebus Resort's 110-mile Barbican Trek. On their first night out, the couple sets up camp on a ridge, dines on freeze-dried chicken tetrizzini, and retires to their tent. Later that night, Olivia and Mark are attacked and abducted.

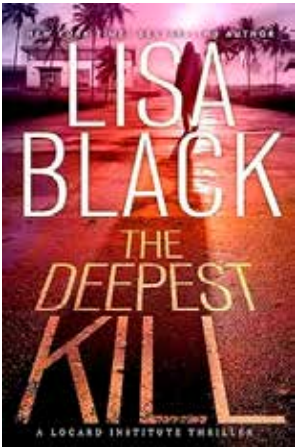
To investigate the Gunnersons' disappearance, Agent Frankie Cash of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is sent to Erebus along with a CSI team. At the resort, Cash collaborates with Sheriff James Colcord. Cash, a sharp-tongued woman who comes from Maine, and Colcord, an old-fashioned guy who hails from Colorado, start out as uneasy partners but ultimately work well together.

When the investigators search the woods, they sense silent shapes flitting through the trees and hear hideous yowling. Cash and Colcord realize cryptic creatures are scurrying around the resort, which is made even more evident by additional frightening occurrences.

As evidence is collected and analyzed, Cash and Colcord conclude that a good deal of lying and deception is occurring. The investigators probe into events more deeply, and shocking secrets are revealed.

The novel, a combination police procedural and adventure story, is engaging and suspenseful, with an interesting array of characters. For a glimpse of things we might see in the future, read the book. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer



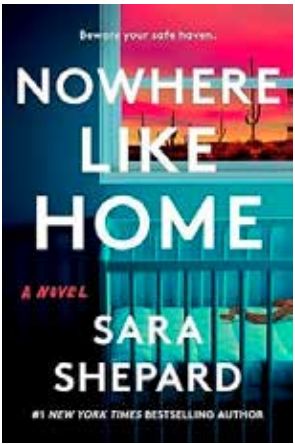
The Deepest Kill
Lisa Black

Tech mogul Martin Post, one of the wealthiest men in America, has hired the Locard Institute, which specializes in forensic science, to look into the death of his beloved pregnant daughter, Ashley, after her body was found washed up on the shore near Martin's estate.

Ashley's mother died eight years ago when she was seventeen, and although Martin has

since remarried, Ashley is still very close and precious to him and gets on well with her stepmother. Ashley and her husband, Greg Anderson, both worked for her Martin's company, Oak Tree, living in their own apartment on his huge, secure estate on the coast of the Gulf of Florida. The morning she died, Ashley took her boat out into the Gulf, as she did every day, to work on her laptop in the peace and tranquility of the water. A good swimmer, she somehow ended up falling into the water and drowning after sustaining a head injury.

Although the county coroner has ruled Ashley's death an accident, Martin is not convinced and wants the Locard to perform a second autopsy and review the investigation to look for signs of foul play. Assistant Dean of the institute and ex-medical examiner, Dr. Rachel Davies, and ex-FBI agent, Dr. Ellie Carr, have arrived in Florida and will liaise with the FBI agents investigating the case.



Nowhere Like Home
Sara Shepard

Difficult pasts and unhealthy friendships are featured in this psychological drama and crime novel. Lenna Schmidt is surprised when she gets a call from an old friend. Rhiannon had disappeared a few years ago and now has a son. Lenna learns she is living in rural Arizona with a group of women and children in a community called Halcyon Farm. They're

mostly off-the-grid and Lenna is invited to visit.

Lenna's five-month-old son, Jacob, cries constantly and her husband, Daniel, doesn't seem to help. Maybe getting away for a few days and repairing her friendship with Rhiannon is what she needs. Upon arrival, Lenna learns that the community has rules about outside phone calls and asking questions about the women's pasts. Additionally, the gate is

Oak Tree is in the final stages of putting together a huge defense proposal for the U.S. Department of Defense and must shortly meet a deadline to demonstrate to the military that their system will work. Martin is concerned that Ashley's death might have been orchestrated by one of his competitors or even a foreign power in order to scupper his chance at winning the massive contract. He is also not a big fan of his son-in-law, Greg, who hadn't shown any enthusiasm for his impending fatherhood.

The novel could be enjoyed as a standalone. The characters and their backstories have been fleshed out in the previous two books of the series, however there is sufficient description here to enable readers to form a good picture of them as complex but likeable and resilient women. Rachael is a confident leader, and although Ellie is often unsure of herself, she is braver than she thinks.

This carefully plotted mystery is well written with false leads and unexpected twists leading to the gradual uncovering of secrets. Lisa's Black professional knowledge of forensic science adds authenticity to Rachael and Ellie's observations and will be interesting to readers who enjoy crime scene investigations. Like the waters of the Gulf in the impending storm that arrives at the end of the book, their investigation becomes turbulent and dangerous as the pressure ramps up, and a very atmospheric climax perfectly wraps up this compelling thriller.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott

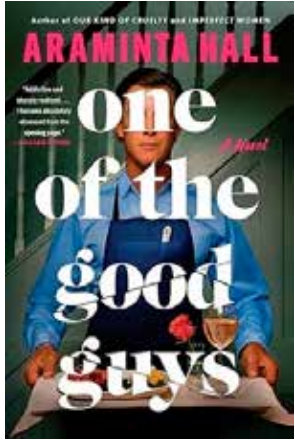
padlocked and only the leader knows the codes.

Lenna believes in omens, is unsure of herself, and hates being out of control. Rhiannon desires a community of some sort, not a romantic partner. She can also be manipulative and has secrets, but so does Lenna. Through the perspectives of Lenna and Rhiannon, as well as two other women, Gillian and Sarah, readers see how each views the others and their relationships, adding depth and complexity.

The story imbues in the reader a feeling of deep anxiety for Lenna as she tries to make sense of the circumstances she finds herself in. However, I kept wanting her to be stronger and take control of her life. The book has a deeply involved plot and good character development, along with a remote desert setting. Themes include friendship, social anxiety, secrets, support, and much more.

Overall, this is thought-provoking with complex characters and plenty of angst and suspense, along with a couple of action scenes. The book has a great premise and has some unusual twists.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



One of the Good Guys

Araminta Hall

The first third of Araminta Hall's thought-provoking *One of the Good Guys* gives us Cole Simmonds in his own voice trying to understand why his wife Mel is divorcing him. He's confused and confounded as he thinks he's done everything that most men don't in a relationship. He wanted to be totally in tune with Mel, both physically and mentally. He not only desperately

wanted a baby, but he helped her through the difficulty of IVF even though he felt the stress of her job was responsible for the failures of their pregnancies. Then Mel hits him with the devastating news she is divorcing him, selling their flat, and destroying the three remaining embryos. Cole begs her not to destroy the embryos. He's convinced that he and Mel need each other and doesn't think Mel can cope without him.

Distraught, he finds a job keeping people safe from a dangerous area along a coastal cliff and makes friends with Leonora, an artist, who lives in a cabin along the seaside cliff where he is also housed for his job. Some of Cole's activities are questionable, such as his killing and butchering rabbits, and leaving their internal organs outside Leonora's cabin so the

foxes howl and eat them. He does this so Leonora will rely on him to make her feel safe. He's trying to make a point.

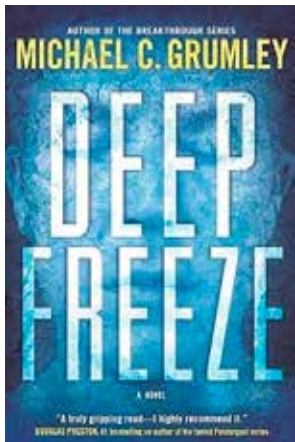
During this time, two young activist women with Walk for Women and a large following camp along the coastal cliff. Cole finds them sitting on the edge of the cliff, a dangerous place to be. He tries to talk the women off the cliff, but the women get hostile and threaten to call the police. The next day, the women disappear, and their tent and gear are left nearby. He becomes a suspect in their disappearance.

Mel's story takes up the second act, starting with how she and Cole met, fell in love, and how and why she could not be with him anymore. We also learn of Cole's sexual kink.

Twist after twist takes the plot to the final third where the author uses social media messages, Leonora's voice, and newspaper articles to follow what happens with Cole, Leonora, Melanie, and the two activists. The big reveal at the end crushes anything that seemed possible, yet at the same time feels perfect for the situation.

One of the Good Guys is not only difficult to review, but challenging as no one is particularly sympathetic. However, the characters are so sharply realized that you know they are necessary for an understanding of where we are in the gender divide. This quote is used in the thriller's promo: "If most men claim to be good, why are most women still afraid to walk alone?"

Reviewed by Valerie J. Brooks



Deep Freeze

Michael C. Grumley

In a desolate world, destroyed by power and the quest for greed, how far would you go to obtain immortality? What, and who, would you risk?

Army veteran John Reiff is killed after the bus he is riding on crashes into a frozen river—or at least, that's what everyone believes. So, when he wakes up twenty-two years later in a medical laboratory, he has

some obvious questions. His doctors seem to know very little, only that he is part of a very prolific experiment that will have a tremendous impact on humanity. But John, too, has some secrets he's keeping and when the dangerous people behind the "Program" seek to cut their losses, John knows he has to use every skill he has to stay alive.

Grumley's novel plays out like an action-packed Hollywood movie, with shifty alliances, government corruption and life-altering scientific experiments and it is every bit as gripping and addicting as something on the silver screen. John has a

Jason Bourne vibe that instantly makes him likable, worthy of empathy while still being incredibly bad-ass, and readers will quickly find themselves rooting for him.

The novel starts with the bus crash, and Grumley paints the desperate struggle for life in the icy cold waters in such an immersive way that I instantly got chills. Right away, there is tension and suspense, and by the first page it becomes far too late to turn back.

There is scientific language in the novel, of course, but Grumley provides the reader with information without inundating them with indigestible terminology. The process of gene sequencing, cryogenics, and the reconstruction of the human body is outlined without becoming all-encompassing.

The chapters are short, and yet they are jam-packed with drama and hard-core action. The terrifying depictions of the post-apocalyptic world they now live in really cuts to the core and does not go beyond the realm of possibility, which adds a layer of unsettling turmoil to the plot.

Deep Freeze was an instant page-turner, and it comes as no surprise that John Reiff will be returning in subsequent novels in this burgeoning series.

Reviewed by Erin Clemence

Joe Erickson Mysteries

by Lynn-Steven Johanson



What the Reviewers Say

Rose's Thorn: "...fantastically woven with twists and turns that keep the reader guessing and on the edge of their seat." - *Literary Titan*

Havana Brown: This story relentlessly builds as insidiously as the anger of Johanson's antagonist until you're turning pages faster and faster." - *BookTrib.com*

Corrupted Souls: "Lynn-Steven Johanson returns with a riveting addition to the Joe Erickson Mystery series." - *Independent Book Review*

One of Ours: "Mystery readers, including newcomers to Joe Erickson's world, will find *One of Ours* compelling, action-packed, and hard to put down." - *Midwest Book Review*

Published by Level Best Books

