

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

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**Feature: Social Justice
in Crime Fiction**

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**Author Q&As: Lisa Scottoline, Kristin
Hannah, Mary Kubica, Andrews & Wilson**

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**Feature: Where to Get
Ideas for Fiction**

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**Reviews: *The Intruder*, *Cold to the Touch*,
If Something Happens to Me, and more**

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

Celebrating four years (and fifteen issues) of our magazine.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

This summer marks the four-year anniversary of *Mystery and Suspense Magazine*. In the grand scheme of things, it's not long. But in that time we've published thousands of posts online—reviews, features, interviews, and more. We've also put out fifteen volumes of the magazine, with the same great content you read on our website.

We think you'll love this edition. There are interviews with excellent authors, including Lisa Scottoline, Mary Kubica, Brian Andrews & Jeffrey Wilson, and Kristin Hannah. Features on mystery reading and writing. And all the crime, mystery, suspense, and thriller reviews you've come to expect.

Happy reading,
Sam

Mystery & Suspense Magazine
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UNRELIABLE NARRATORS IN SUSPENSE

Suspense fiction thrives on the unpredictable, weaving narratives that grip with tension and mysteries that unravel in the least expected ways. At the heart of many such stories lies the unreliable narrator, a master of deception whose twisted tales challenge perceptions and question reality.

Diving into the labyrinth of suspense fiction, one finds themselves in a hall of mirrors, where every reflection distorts the truth and every shadow hides a secret. This exploration delves into some of the most memorable unreliable narrators who have captivated readers and viewers alike, proving that sometimes, the most thrilling journey is not about finding the truth, but questioning everything we thought we knew.

Consider the haunting corridors of Manderley in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, where the ghost of a past wife looms large over a young bride and her mysterious husband, Maxim de Winter. The nameless narrator's self-doubt and naiveté cloud her perception, leading readers down a path strewn with secrets and lies. The novel's atmospheric tension and psychological depth have inspired numerous adaptations, most notably Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 film, which captures the story's eerie essence and complex characters, making audiences question what lurks beneath the surface of a seemingly perfect life.

Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* introduces readers to Tom Ripley, a chameleon-like figure whose talents extend far beyond mere mimicry. Ripley's charm and intelligence make him a captivating narrator, even as his dark ambitions reveal a chilling capacity for manipulation and murder. Highsmith masterfully blurs the lines between sympathy and horror, drawing readers into Ripley's twisted psyche. The novel's adaptation into the 1999 film starring Matt Damon further explores the enigmatic nature of Ripley, showcasing the terrifying allure of an unreliable narrator who wears deceit as easily as a tailored suit.

In *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, readers are thrust into the mind of an unnamed protagonist battling insomnia and disillusionment with modern life. The introduction of Tyler Durden, a charismatic and anarchistic figure, leads to the creation of Fight Club, a secret society that spirals into something far more sinister. Palahniuk's narrative is a dizzying blend of reality and illusion, with the shocking

revelation of Tyler's true nature forcing readers to question everything they believed about the narrator. The 1999 film adaptation captures the novel's gritty aesthetic and psychological depth, making the twist all the more impactful.

Atonement by Ian McEwan presents a different kind of unreliability, one rooted in misunderstanding and the desire for redemption. Through the eyes of young Briony Tallis, readers witness an accusation that changes the lives of her sister Cecilia and her lover, Robbie, forever. McEwan expertly navigates the complexities of perspective and memory, revealing how a single moment can alter the course of multiple lives. The novel's adaptation into a critically acclaimed 2007 film brings this heartbreaking story of love and loss to life, underscoring the power of narrative to both destroy and heal.

Shifting to a more recent example, *The Woman in the Window* by A.J. Finn introduces Dr. Anna Fox, an agoraphobic psychologist who believes she witnesses a crime in her neighbor's house. Finn expertly crafts a narrative filled with doubt and paranoia, as Anna's reliability is constantly questioned due to her psychological state and dependence on alcohol and medication. The novel's suspense is rooted in the tension between reality and perception, leading readers on a thrilling ride that culminates in shocking revelations. The adaptation of the novel into a 2021 film further explores the themes of isolation and the search for truth in a world where seeing is not always believing.

These narratives, each a masterpiece in its own right, showcase the compelling allure of the unreliable narrator. Whether through the lens of psychological thriller, Gothic romance, or social commentary, these stories challenge readers to question the nature of truth and the reliability of perception. In the ever-twisting corridors of suspense fiction, the unreliable narrator stands as a testament to the genre's ability to delve into the darkest corners of the human mind, proving that the most enthralling mysteries are those that lie within us.



Lisa Scottoline
Edgar Award-winning author
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Lisa Scottoline

Lisa Scottoline is a #1 bestselling and Edgar Award-winning author of more than thirty novels. Lisa's books are book club favorites, and she and her daughter Francesca Serritella have hosted an annual Big Book Club Party for over a thousand readers at her Pennsylvania farm, for the past twelve years. Lisa has been President of Mystery Writers of America and she reviews fiction and non-fiction for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She also writes a weekly column with her daughter for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled "Chick Wit," a witty take on life from a woman's perspective, which have been collected in a bestselling series of humorous memoirs.

Q. *The Truth about the Devlins* combines familial ties with the intensity of legal drama. How did you navigate intertwining these elements, and what impact do you hope it has on your readers?

Lisa: Honestly, I want everything, I want the reader to be entertained, to turn the pages, to be a little breathless about what's going to happen next, and even to cry. That's what I love about our genre, that it can bring macro elements like questions of law, justice, and morality, but at the same time focus on the micro level, like the combustible dynamics in any family. I couldn't feel luckier or more blessed to be writing suspense.

Q. The story pivots around John's startling murder confession. Could you share your thought process in crafting this critical turning point and its implications for the unfolding plot?

Lisa: The hook of the book is that the Golden Boy in the family commits a murder and asks the Ne'er-Do-Well Brother to help him hide the body. The idea just came to me one day, and I loved it because honestly I think all of us who write crime fiction are writing into a time when questions of law and justice are extremely complex. It's hard to tell who are the good guys and who are the bad guys anymore, and I dealt with that in my previous novel *What Happened to the Bennetts*, where I had the character actually say that there are "good bad guys" and "bad good guys." That ironic wrench carries through in *The Truth about the Devlins*, so expectations that we have for each other in a family are turned upside-down, on their head. I really thought a lot about the way families work and how the early roles we get can stifle us in so many ways, since they don't enable us to grow. I also wanted to explore a deeply flawed hero, whom I happen to have a major crush

on, so there's that. I like TJ Devlin because I really think he's a man for our times—he's in recovery, not only from alcoholism, but from all of the mistakes he's made along the way. All of us suffer from self-inflicted wounds, I myself am divorced twice. (It was the marriage that was the wound, not the divorce, lol.) But I think the coolest thing in this novel and really any good novel is to watch a hero struggle and see how he gets out of it, if he does.

Q. Exploring themes like deception, justice, and familial breakdowns is a complex task, especially in a thriller context. How do you manage to keep these serious themes engaging without losing the novel's thrilling essence?

Lisa: That's very kind of you to say, and I'll give you the nitty gritty answer because I really want to encourage anyone who wants to write to please get started. And the answer is the editing process. I never write with an outline, I just have an idea and start writing, and each chapter answers the question what would logically happen next? Amazingly, it turns out that you can write a whole novel that way, that you will be in a state of anxiety most of the time. I've written thirty-five novels that way and can't do it any other way. So you just tell yourself the story and by the end you go back and begin to edit and that's when the paring down happens so that all of these elements that you probably spend too much time on get trimmed up and slimmed down and the story becomes more supple and fleet. I always say to myself, get it down, then get it good.

Q. Throughout *The Truth about the Devlins*, TJ evolves significantly, especially in his role as an investigator. What was your strategy for depicting this evolution, and what were the most challenging aspects of showing his growth?

Lisa: This is a really good question because TJ Devlin has dug himself into a pretty deep hole, and, like a lot of

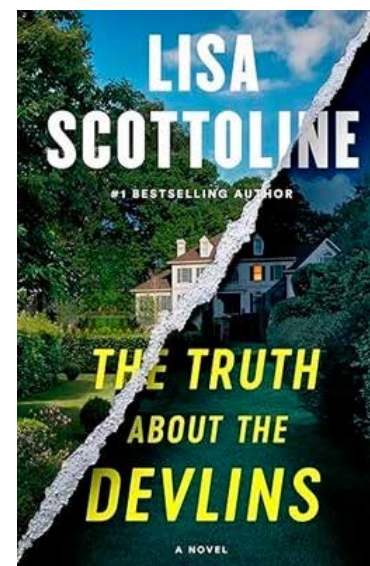
dysfunctional people, he leaves a trail of pissed off friends, lovers, and family members in his wake. I myself have known people like that, and it's very hard to repair relationships and not many people get it right. Alcoholics Anonymous is a wonderful program, and TJ is a recovering alcoholic, and it's so interesting to me that the program itself asks its members to make amends to those they have wronged. So the question for me in *The Truth about the Devlins* was the balance I had to strike between making TJ believably flawed, but not so flawed that the reader would hate his guts. I really loved him despite his flaws, and I won't spoil anything, but I like the ending as well. I think it all rings emotionally true, and that's what really matters, in any novel.

Q. Can you share a particular scene or aspect of the book that you found most enjoyable or fulfilling to write, and what made it stand out for you?

Lisa: This will sound immodest, but I just got the finished copy and I read the first chapter again, and I truly think it's the best first chapter I have written in my life. As I've mentioned above, it's a scene in which the Golden Boy brother tells TJ that he has committed a murder and asks TJ to help him hide the body. So the predicament is clear, and it's a compelling one, but most importantly, it's told in TJ's point of view and TJ is a clever, funny guy. I love that in characters just as much as I love it in people. Smart people are funny and TJ is completely lovable, even though he is basically admitting that he would have no trouble hiding a dead body for his brother. And TJ's voice is engaging, and I knew he had to be, because there's a lot of tough twists and turns in this novel, as well as some straight-up violence, and so the whole book is on his shoulders. I think he carried it off.

Q. What's next?

Lisa: Mum's the word!!!



Lisa Scottoline's latest:
The Truth About The Devlins

TJ Devlin is the charming disappointment in the prominent Devlin family, all of whom are lawyers at their highly successful firm—except him. After a stint in prison and rehab for alcoholism, TJ can't get hired anywhere except at the firm, in a make-work job with the title of investigator.

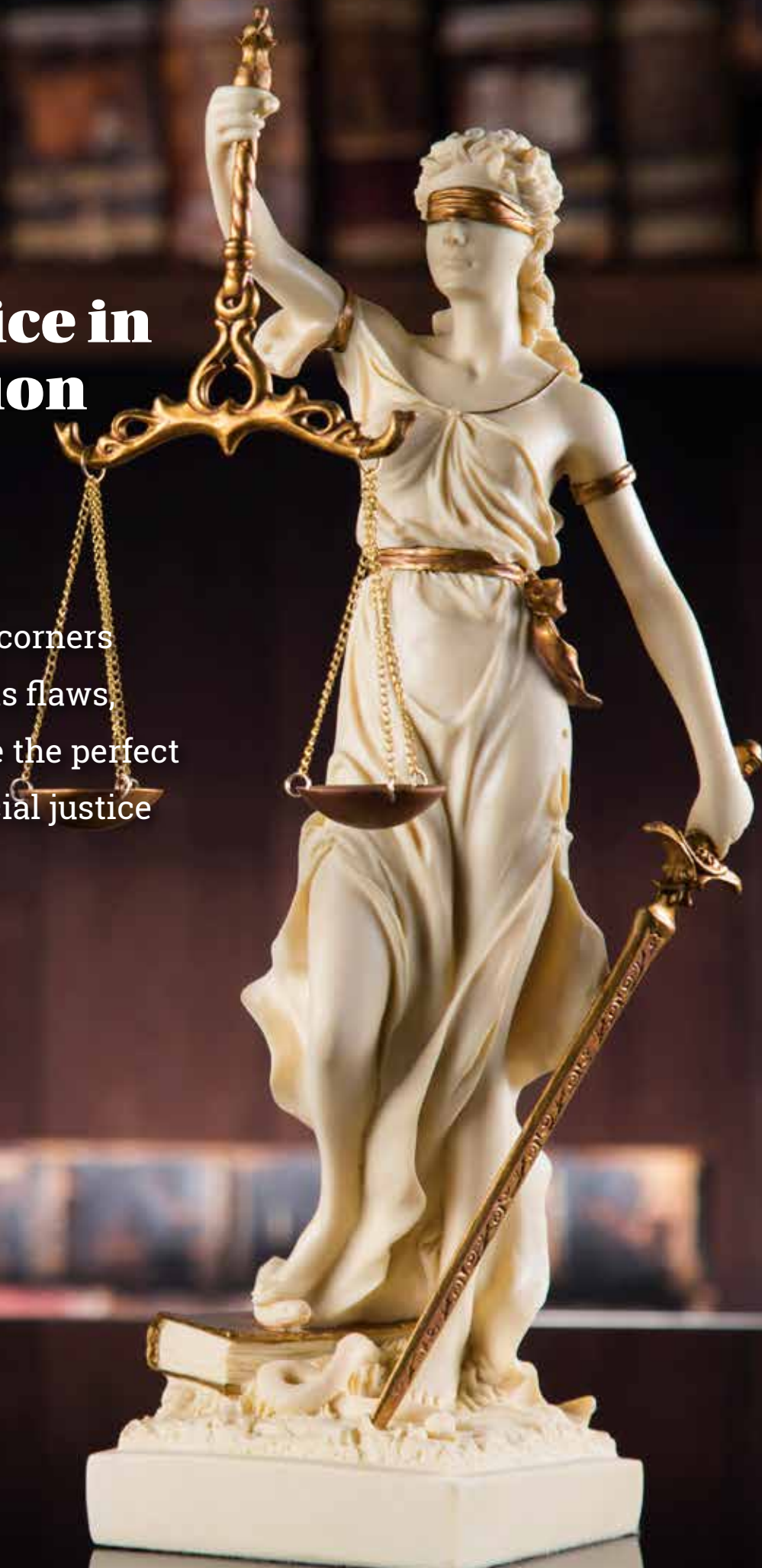
But one night, TJ's world turns upside down after his older brother John confesses that he murdered one of their clients, an accountant he'd confronted with proof of embezzlement. It seems impossible coming from John, the firstborn son and Most Valuable Devlin.

TJ plunges into the investigation, seizing the chance to prove his worth and save his brother. But in no time, TJ and John find themselves entangled in a lethal web of deception and murder. TJ will fight to save his family, but what he learns might break them first.

Social Justice in Crime Fiction

BY DEBORAH L. CANNON

By exposing the dark corners where society hides its flaws, crime fiction might be the perfect vehicle to address social justice



Armand Gamache of the Sûreté du Québec (Quebec Provincial Police) sees an Indigenous woman seated forlornly outside a hotel, which he later learns she believes is the National Assembly of Ottawa. He asks her what's wrong. She tells him that she is Cree and that her son is missing.

That, in fact, many Cree boys are missing. They have been recruited by the government to do evil acts. Then killed to erase any traces leading back to those responsible, and their bodies are disappeared.

Corruption is bubbling at the highest levels of the police force. Meanwhile Chief Inspector Gamache finds himself in the village of Three Pines. As his team solves murders in the tiny village, the corruption grows in the background. We meet the members of his team. The devoted agents and the rookie outlier. We meet the village residents. A gay couple, a black bookstore owner, a pair of emotionally stunted artists, and a foul-mouthed crone of a poet. Each has a story to tell about love, loyalty and altruism. Greed, jealousy and fear.

Crime fiction like Louise Penny's beloved *Three Pines* mysteries reveals faults in society. It exposes the dark corners where society hides its flaws. Whether the narrative is a classic detective story or a murder mystery, a crime thriller or a cozy, these types of stories allow for a deep dive into human nature.

THE MYSTERY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The TV adaptation of *Three Pines* switches the backstory from missing Aboriginal men to missing Aboriginal women. As Gamache makes a promise to a Mohawk family to find a woman named Blue Two-Rivers, the authorities look the other way. The message is the same whether the missing Indigenous person is a man or a woman. The murders of these people are not important to the police until Chief Inspector Gamache steps in.

Louise Penny's novel *A Fatal Grace* follows Gamache and his team as they investigate a socialite's murder. CC de Poitiers is a wealthy white woman. Her death mobilizes the police to find the killer, while the disappearance of Blue Two-Rivers is recklessly pinned on a convenient Indigenous man.

In Victoria Thompson's *Gaslight Mysteries*, each book reflects a New York City neighborhood at the turn of the 20th century. From abandoned pregnant girls in abusive situations, to ethnic groups on the wrong side of an iffy justice system, policemen take on cases depending on how much a victim's family is willing to pay.

Thompson's protagonist is midwife Sarah Brandt. She takes on the NYC police department—especially one particular cop, Frank Malloy—to help underprivileged women of all ethnicities and religions while solving murders. Malloy himself, an Irishman, is considered a second-rate citizen among his peers. When he decides to help Sarah, he can expect no official help.

Chinese men in New York City were forbidden to bring wives from China, so they married Irish women who arrived in America alone. This is the premise of Victoria Thompson's book *Murder in Chinatown*. The children of these mixed marriages were treated badly. So, when a young girl of mixed descent turns up dead, the police ignore it. Except for Frank Malloy at the urging of Sarah Brant.

People read mysteries like the *Three Pines* and *Gaslight Mysteries* for entertainment. But beneath the enjoyment of solving a twisty puzzle, readers crave justice. And it is in these diverse tales of murder that they find it.

CRIMINAL SOCIAL VALUES

The world should value all people—despite gender, race, religion, age, sexual orientation or social and economic class. Or physical or mental ability. But sometimes, it doesn't.

Grayson Sykes is a female private detective in Rachel Howzell Hall's crime thriller *And Now She's Gone*. Grayson

is searching for Isabel Lincoln, a missing woman, who may or may not wish to be found. Her client is the woman's superficially loving boyfriend who turns out to be an abuser. He probably wouldn't even care what happened to her if it wasn't for the fact that she disappeared with his dog. Grayson also has an abusive partner. And as parallel stories develop between Grayson and the missing woman, a tale unravels of the limited options women have in a society afraid to admit to one of its most shameful secrets. Domestic abuse.

In Nancy Jooyoun Kim's *The Last Story of Mina Lee*, a Korean woman goes to the U.S. in search of a better life. A war orphan and an undocumented immigrant, Mina is estranged from her American daughter who barely speaks her mother's language. When daughter Margot fails to hear from Mina, she visits her mother's home in Koreatown only to find her dead. Is it murder? In flashbacks we learn of the dark silence and the lost connections between generations. As American immigrants fight prejudice while juggling their old culture with the new, their children strive to find their own identity. Margot learns all about her mother's past—the struggles and the secrets—and her own shortcomings while trying to discover how and why her mother died.

Rhythm and Blues star Kory Fields is dead. What started out as a dream for aspiring young singer, Enchanted Jones, is now a nightmare. Enchanted Jones wakes up covered in blood with no memory of how the blood got there. Or even where she is. The police claim that Kory Fields, her lover, manager and benefactor was murdered. And she—a seventeen-year-old black girl—is the suspect! *Grown* by Tiffany D. Jackson is a YA mystery inspired by the true story of R. Kelly, a sexual abuser, whose horrific actions were largely ignored by the authorities of his time. In this murder mystery that becomes a tale of sexual and emotional

exploitation, Jackson dares us to confront a disturbing issue: the abuse of the young because they are poor, female, and starstruck. And the charming abusers who get away with it because they are rich, manipulative and powerful.

A good crime story is the perfect forum for exposing society's ills. It can entertain and at the same time teach us something about ourselves.

EMPATHY THROUGH FICTIONAL VIOLENCE

In fiction, people kill for the American Dream. What the American Dream is differs from person to person. But when people turn to crime to achieve it, we are forced to see its dark side. In whatever permutation—the pursuit of wealth, career, relationships, fame, money, or power—we are ultimately faced with the viewpoint of its victims.

Will Trent is a police procedural TV crime drama based on Karin Slaughter's novels of the same name. A backstory for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Deputy Director, Amanda Wagner, shows that for a woman, success is hard won. As a young rookie she stopped a man for a routine traffic stop sign violation. The man, twice her size, beat her up and almost raped her. When she reported the incident to her police captain father, he ordered her to forget about it. The perp, a serial rapist and murderer, got away Scott free, not only for the assault on Amanda, but for all the other horrors he committed because victims were too afraid to testify. Amanda plants cocaine on him and he is imprisoned for thirty years. After release, he is determined to get revenge. He frames Amanda for murder for which she is exonerated. But before he can kill her, Trent shoots him.

Our deep empathy for Amanda is the only way we can reconcile that she, a high-level law enforcement officer,

committed a crime in order to get justice. After all, what was she supposed to do when the justice system failed?

Only in crime fiction can we sanction this form of justice.

THE DARK AND THE LIGHT

In real life, justice sometimes fails. And to bolster our belief in a fair and benign world, a mystery writer invents scenarios where good prevails. Louise Penny pits her detective Armand Gamache against a truly formidable foe, Sylvain Francoeur, who is the epitome of evil. As Chief Superintendent—and Gamache's boss—he represents law and order and should have been someone we could trust. Gamache on the other hand is the quintessence of good. A man of compassion, and reason. A man who listens. And thereby finds the truth.

In the *Gaslight Mysteries*, the widower Malloy, a hardboiled police officer and father of a deaf son, falls for the brilliant and benevolent midwife Sarah Brandt. She shows him that his son's hearing deficit doesn't have to stunt his life. Her remarkable people skills and adeptness at solving murders brings out his best qualities. Eventually they marry and become a crime-fighting duo.

Tales of murder and other heinous crime highlight humanity's conflict with good and evil. Through the criminal mind we see the corruption of thought and the degradation of the soul. Through the detective we see courage, fairness and decency. And the best of what makes us human.

The fictional exploration of violence, whether hardboiled or soft, makes us sensitive to the predicament of others. We are urged to imagine a society where our actions have consequences. What we do affects the lives of others.

If we believed that fiction was meant to improve our minds, no one would ever pick up a novel. But when we are engrossed in a good murder mystery, we experience the kind of world we should all try to live in. One that forces us to recognize, not so much how we are different, but how much we are the same.



About the author

Deborah L. Cannon's interest in crime fiction as a vehicle for social justice came from her Chinese immigrant grandfather, who in 1924 fought a racist law forbidding him from hiring white women for his restaurant. She is an eclectic writer who has contributed from the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* franchise to *Mystery and Suspense Magazine*. With a few SF stories in between. She holds degrees in Anthropology and Museum Studies. Her most recent work is the international mystery and crime novel series *Fresco Nights*.



Kristin Hannah
New York Times bestselling author
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Kristin Hannah

Kristin Hannah is the award-winning and best-selling author of more than twenty novels. Her newest novel is *The Women*, about the nurses who served in the Vietnam war.

The Four Winds was published in 2021 and immediately hit #1 on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and indie bestseller lists. Additionally, it was selected as a book club pick by the both the *TODAY Show* and *Book of the Month*, which named it the best book of 2021. In 2018, *The Great Alone* was a *New York Times* #1 bestseller and named the Best Historical Novel of the Year by *Goodreads*.

INTERVIEW BY ELISE COOPER

Q. Why write about Vietnam vets now?

Kristin: It has been on my mind for a long while. I wanted to focus on returning from war. I saw this personally when I was a child. I think for a long time Vietnam was a subject people did not want to read about or talk about. I sought to show what life was like in the Vietnam hospitals with its horror, difficulty, and camaraderie. On a book tour, I was told by both male and female Vietnam vets and their children how this was an unspoken trauma in their family for over fifty years. If the book helps in some small way this makes me happy.

Q. The female lead, Frankie, a Vietnam vet, seems to have the same journey as many vets who come home and feel misunderstood.

Kristin: It is a sad truth that we have often failed our veterans upon their return in how we care for them. This has been my soapbox for a while. If we as a country are going to ask people to put themselves in harm's way for us, it really behooves us to care for them fully when they come home. This is especially true of female veterans, who are often forgotten in this equation.

Q. Your earlier book, *Home Front*, was similar, but focused on a war on terror vet.

Kristin: My passion for wanting to focus on returning veterans led me to write *Home Front*. This was the beginning of my gearing up to write this book, *The Women*. By speaking with a Blackhawk pilot who deployed, Teresa Burgess, a warrant officer, helped me to find authenticity. She also helped me to understand when women are considered in combat and when they are not. This idea that someone can

be a Blackhawk pilot rescuing soldiers in a hot landing zone and not be considered in combat just stayed with me. One of the things the Vietnam nurses heard when they came home and tried to get help for their emotional trauma was, "Well, you were not in combat, so why would you have any issues?"

Q. Your dedication in *The Women* was very powerful. Do you want to explain it?

Kristin: It summarizes the book. It is my discovery of why I wrote this story. It was shocking to see that even the male Vietnam vets brushed off what nurses went through. The women were continually confronted with their invisibility and lack of remembrance for their service even by the VA and those who should have known better. Women have served as nurses in wars for ages. It was weird to me how consistently they were overlooked. They have been marginalized or forgotten.

Q. You do explain that the Vietnam veterans, unlike other vets, were treated horrifically, which included being called baby killers, being flipped off, and spat upon. Why put it in?

Kristin: This is why I wanted to write about the Vietnam era. As a child, I remember how they were treated when they came home. My best friend's father was shot down and I wore his POW bracelet for decades. This stayed with me. I always wanted to write about this terrible and dark period of American history because it's so important for healing, individually and as a nation. We need to recognize and remember their service. I think in many instances they lived in the shadows about what they went through.

Q. You also delve into PTSD.

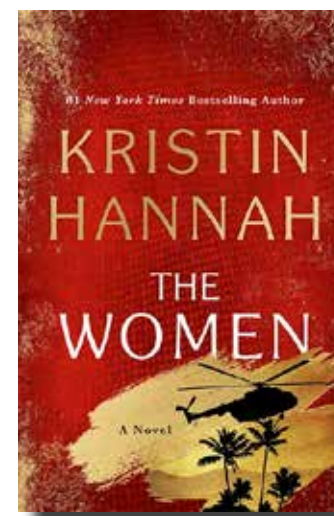
Kristin: Remember, this is a time when there was no help for PTSD for the men either. This is the beginning of the treatment and the understanding of it. The male vets faced daunting challenges to getting help as well, especially in the late 1960s. These vets came home to a toxic American reaction to their service. I do not think it can be overstated about how it affected their healing and wanting to get help. This was entirely new. The WWII vets came home to ticker tape parades of gratitude and honor, while the Vietnam vets, both male and female, came home to horror.

Q. Do you think PTSD played a huge role in the book?

Kristin: In my first draft, I did not include it because I wrote about it before in *Home Front* and *The Great Alone*, the dark side of PTSD. But the truth is, in reading about the Vietnam era vets, it felt wrong not to talk about this journey of theirs including emotional trauma, flashbacks, nightmares, and responses they did not understand. There was this layer of shame and silence that overlaid their service. I had to have Frankie experience what so many of her sister and male counterparts experienced.

Q. Do you have a recurring theme in all your books?

Kristin: Yes, female friendship is something I cared deeply about. It is important to me that Frankie was healed by herself but also with her girlfriends. They saved her.



Kristin Hannah's latest: *The Women*

"Women can be heroes, too."

When twenty-year-old nursing student Frances "Frankie" McGrath hears these unexpected words, it is a revelation. Raised on idyllic Coronado Island and sheltered by her conservative parents, she has always prided herself on doing the right thing, being a good girl. But in 1965 the world is changing, and she suddenly imagines a different choice for her life. When her brother ships out to serve in Vietnam, she impulsively joins the Army Nurse Corps and follows his path.

As green and inexperienced as the men sent to Vietnam to fight, Frankie is overwhelmed by the chaos and destruction of war, as well as the unexpected trauma of coming home to a changed and politically divided America.

The Women is the story of one woman gone to war, but it shines a light on the story of all women who put themselves in harm's way to help others. Women whose sacrifice and commitment to their country has all too often been forgotten.

CHILLS IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES

BY PEGGY WEBB

Dark waters. Isolated farms. Where can secrets be buried? Here's why the perfect crime (thriller) deserves the perfect setting.

Being Southern to the bone, I learned about the importance of place in a novel from the writings of a fellow Mississippi author who won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the great Eudora Welty.

In her essay "On Writing" which appears in her novel, *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, she states: "The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming'—and that is the heart's field."

Consider the blockbuster novel *Mystic River* that also became a hit movie. Author Dennis Lehane uses bodies of water not only as part of the setting, but in ways that impact the characters and the choices they make. In the first chapter Lehane introduces the reader to three young boys who are separated socially and economically by the Penitentiary Channel that splits the impoverished neighborhood called the Flats from the more affluent neighborhood in the Point.

In the first chapter, Lehane uses the channel to create a sense of separation, a deep divide in the boyhood friendship that will carry into adulthood and throughout the rest of the novel.

"Jimmy and Dave came from the Flats, down by the Penitentiary Channel on the south side of Buckingham Avenue. It was only twelve blocks from Sean's street, but the Devines were north of the Ave., part of the Point, and the Point and the Flats didn't mix much."

—*Mystic River*, Dennis Lehane

The reader is immediately sucked into that small slice of neighborhood and into the lives of those three boys. There a sense of foreboding, a feeling that something is off-kilter with their friendship, and there will surely be trouble ahead.

Brooding over the characters and the surrounding city is *Mystic River*, described by Lehane as dark with greasy water, frequent wind, a sagging dock, and a weed-choked beach. The author's choice of stark prose presents a forbidding picture. The river is a place where secrets can be buried. But as we learn later from a character's point of view, the secrets leave behind a nagging fear that they will rise out of the water to destroy him. This section of the book is a perfect blending of setting, voice, and point of view to create a stellar reading experience.

In *Mystic River*, the water symbolizes the passage of time and reinforces a favorite theme of William Faulkner, native Mississippian and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature:

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

–*Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner

Lehane’s finely detailed sense of place, written in prose so lyrical it sometimes reads like poetry, brings the story alive, pulls the reader along the banks of those dark waters and over the bridge that crosses them.

“He looked up at the underside of the bridge, everyone battling to either get into the city or out of it, everyone in an irritated flush... And for what? What did we line up for? Where did we expect to go? And why were we never as happy as we thought we would be once we got there?”

–*Mystic River*, Dennis Lehane

Lehane’s novel is about friendship, betrayal, and the inescapable past, but setting is the heart, just as Eudora Welty said it would be. Lehane’s vivid portrayal of place was key to taking the reader inside the story and making the novel transcend the genre.

Another stunning example of setting used almost as a character is Truman Capote’s masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. His non-fiction, true crime novel is so nuanced, so rich in detail that the reader is swept away by the winds blowing over the flat, endless fields in Kansas.

“...western Kansas winters are imprisoning, and usually frost on the fields and razory winds have altered the climate before Christmas. Some years back, snow had fallen on Christmas Eve and continued falling, and when Bobby set out the next morning for the Clutter property, a three-mile walk, he had had to fight through deep drifts.”

–*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote

Capote’s use of fictional techniques makes this account of the Clutter family killings read with the breathless intensity of fiction, much of it achieved by setting. Descriptions of the Clutter’s isolated farm create a dark and brooding image of a place waiting to be discovered by evil.

“...if the day was warm and sun-kindled, they stopped along the way and sat by the river, a snaky, slow-moving, brown piece of the Arkansas.”

–*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote

The river and the farm are inextricably bound in the character Bobby’s mind to his doomed love of Nancy Clutter, forbidden by her father and cut short by her murder. She had once told Bobby about seeing the Arkansas River in Colorado as “pure as drinking water,” vastly different from the same river on her farm.

“It stayed with Bobby, her memory of the river’s source, and since her death... Well, he couldn’t explain it, but whenever he looked at the Arkansas, it was for an instant transformed, and what he saw was not a muddy stream meandering across the Kansas plains, but what Nancy had described—a Colorado torrent, a chilly, crystal trout river speeding down a mountain valley. That was how Nancy has been: like young water—energetic, joyous.”

–*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote

Capote’s roots in the Deep South show in his exquisite use of place. He was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, into a troubled family who turned him over to his mother’s family in Monroeville, Alabama, where he was a neighbor and became a lifelong friend to Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*). She stayed with him in Kansas for months doing initial research for the book, and accompanied him

on his return trips over the next six years while the killers, Perry Edward Smith and Richard Eugene Hickock, were captured, brought to trial, and executed.

During this long research and writing process, Capote developed a strange and bizarre friendship with the killers, particularly the more complex of the two, Perry Smith, a man full of contradictions. “I thought he (Herb Clutter) was a very nice gentleman. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat.”

It is through Capote’s friendship with the killers and the locals of Holcombe, Kansas, that he gets his most stunning descriptions of place. Small details of the Clutter home after the murder put the reader on the scene. Nancy’s teddy bear “starring” from her bloody bed, her curtains open with sunlight pouring in, her purse lying on the kitchen floor, open, the kitchen, itself, devoid of dishes or food on the stove. The Clutters, who lived by routine, had not been down for breakfast in the large ranch house that rang with silence. Everything chilling, devoid of life.

Capote’s stark details of death row contrast the victims’ once-vibrant and productive lives with the killers’ emptiness and futility. Hickock’s cell had no window. He spent days, months, years in useless inactivity, mostly sleeping. Perry had a light bulb that burned eternally. He used the handle of a broom in his cell to unscrew the bulb. Though he often thought of breaking the glass and slitting his wrists, he lived on.

Both of them did. In the end, they died as surely as their victims, Hickock, “his face puffy, pallid as funeral lily, gleamed in the weak sunshine filtering through the bar-studded glass,” and Perry, “... a dwarfish boy-man...his childish feet, tilted, dangling.”

It’s telling that Capote ends *In Cold Blood* with the setting. Years after the murder, Al Dewey, the lead investigator, is at the cemetery cleaning the Clutters’ graves when an encounter with Nancy Clutter’s best friend resurrects memories that highlight the senseless nature of the killings.

“...he called after her as she disappeared down the path, a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining—just such a young girl as Nancy might have been. Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.”

–*In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote

And there is it—once again—setting conveying theme, William Faulkner’s famous line from *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”



About the author

Peggy Webb is the *USA Today* bestselling author of more than 100 novels in numerous genres, including the reader favorite crime thriller *Snow Brides* and the acclaimed literary fiction novel *The Sweetest Hallelujah*, written under her pen name Elaine Hussey. She has co-written screenplays for two of her novels and is active with the film festival in her hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi, which is also the birthplace of Elvis. Learn more at peggywebb.com.



Mary Kubica
New York Times bestselling author
marykubica.com

Mary Kubica

Mary Kubica is a *New York Times* bestselling author of suspense thrillers including *The Good Girl*, *The Other Mrs.*, and *Local Woman Missing*. Her books have been translated into over thirty languages and have sold over two million copies worldwide. She's been described as "a helluva storyteller" (*Kirkus*) and "a writer of vice-like control" (*Chicago Tribune*), and her novels have been praised as "hypnotic" (*People*) and "thrilling and illuminating" (*L.A. Times*). She lives outside of Chicago with her husband and children.

INTERVIEW BY ELISE COOPER

Q. In your latest, *She's Not Sorry*, did the plot's twist or its conclusion come to you first when you were conceptualizing the book?

Mary: I started with the twist first, which is unusual for me. I have a starting point and no idea where I am going with it. With this one the twist came first and then I stepped backwards and created the characters to go with it, building up to it.

Q. How significant are comas in the storyline, and what kind of research did you do to portray this aspect accurately?

Mary: I did not know anyone who has been in a coma, but I did quite a bit of research. This book has a medical setting and there was a patient in a coma. I am also very fortunate to have several friends who are nurses, some ICU nurses. There is nothing like speaking to someone who knows the information and lives in that world. I asked them some very specific questions including the day-to-day experience of being a nurse. I wanted a couple of nurses to read the book after it was finished for accuracy.

Q. Can you share insights into Sienna's character and her dynamics within the story?

Mary: A typical sixteen-year-old girl. My daughter would have been the same age at the time I started writing this book. She is a little sassy, defiant, and likes to push the boundaries. She and her mother Meghan have a great relationship. They are close. She is obviously not shy and speaks her mind.

Q. Meghan's character seems complex and multifaceted. How would you describe her, particularly in her role as a mother and her personal challenges?

Mary: As a mother she puts her daughter first: Sienna's happiness and safety. She has recently gone through a divorce and is trying to find her footing. Being a nurse and having to work she is trying to find the right balance between being a solo parent and working mom. She is very empathetic. But will do anything to protect those she loves. She is compassionate, guarded, and tough.

Q. Nat's presence in the story appears to be quite pivotal. What role does she play in the narrative?

Mary: Meghan remembers her as a high school friend. She thought she knew her more than she did. She felt safe with her because Nat was someone she grew up with. Because she went through this divorce, she feels isolated, desperate, and alone, so she confides in her a deep secret.

Q. The prologue sets a dramatic tone for the book. What was your thought process in crafting this scene?

Mary: This was not the first thing I wrote. I knew I wanted to start something out with a bang that would grip the readers. As a parent the idea of someone taking their child is every parent's worst nightmare.

Q. Virtual kidnapping is a rather unique concept in the story. Could you explain if it's based on real incidents?

Mary: Sadly, this is prevalent these days. It is a way to get money even though there was never a kidnapping. They do not have that person.

Q. Facing a virtual kidnapping situation in your story, would you personally have reacted by paying the ransom immediately?

Mary: I do not know. This is one of the things I would bring up in my books. What would the reader do? Thankfully, most of us have never been in this situation. But if I thought someone had my child and had a short time to pay this ransom, I might have done it.

Q. Caitlin's character seems to unravel as the story progresses. Can you delve into her significance in the story and how her perception changes?

Mary: She is the patient in the ICU and unconscious. Because she cannot speak the readers get information from her parents, the Becketts. They reveal more and more about her over time. The more we learn about her, the less we like her. In the beginning Meghan bonds with Mrs. Beckett because they are both mothers who care so much about their daughters.

Q. Looking ahead, can you share any details about your next book project?

Mary: I just started it, so no title and no release date. It is another suspense novel. This has a new setting, the North Woods of Wisconsin. Two families go on vacation together and bad things start to happen.



Mary Kubica's latest: *She's Not Sorry*

Meghan Michaels is trying to find balance between being a single mom to a teenage daughter and working as a full time nurse. While on duty at the hospital one day, a patient named Caitlin arrives in a coma with a traumatic brain injury, having jumped from a bridge and plunging over twenty feet to the train tracks below.

But when a witness comes forward with shocking details about the fall, it calls everything they know into question. Was Caitlin pushed and if so, by whom and why?

Meghan has always tried to stay emotionally detached from her patients, but this time, she mistakenly lets herself get too close until she's deeply entangled in Caitlin's and her family's lives. Only when it's too late, does she realize that she and her daughter could be the next victims.

Where to Get Ideas for Fiction

BY DANA PERRY

“Where do you get your ideas?” That’s the question crime fiction authors get asked all the time by readers about their books. I have a simple answer. From the news headlines!

I’m a longtime New York City journalist (*New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *Star* magazine, NBC News) so I run into ideas for crime fiction all the time. I’ve covered big news stories like Son of Sam, O.J. Simpson, Ted Bundy, Casey Anthony, and Jon Benet Ramsey.

So when people ask me the “where do you get your ideas?” question, it’s easy to respond by saying: “Hey, I just go to work in the newsroom every day.”

The common term for this kind of fiction drawn from real life events is “ripped from the headlines”—which, of course, was first popularized by the success of the *Law and Order* TV series, which has told these kind of stories on the air for years.

Me, I’ve done a lot of the same things with the actual crimes I’ve covered as a journalist—using the real life facts in these sensational stories in an effort to come up with an even more sensational crime novel.

Son of Sam was the easiest to do that with, because he’s the ultimate real life serial killer. He terrorized New York City for a year and a half by randomly shooting people—mostly young women—on the streets or in parked cars. I’ve used the Son of Sam story for inspiration in several different books I’ve written about serial killers.

But celebrity crimes—like the O.J. Simpson case and John Lennon’s murder—have given me material for thriller books too, providing the opportunity to mix murder with high profile stars and entertainment figures.

Of course, you have to do much more than just recite the facts of a famous case to succeed with a story of your own. I have a pretty simple approach for doing that: the “What If?” question. What if Son of Sam didn’t really kill all those people alone—or maybe didn’t actually do any of the murders and the real killer or killers went free? What if John Lennon somehow survived the shooting by Mark David Chapman and is still alive somewhere? What if the O.J. murder case didn’t

turn out the way it did, and we find out shocking new secrets about the deaths?

I’ve used variations of all these cases to come with my own versions of all these news stories I’ve covered for my novels. And it doesn’t always have to be a big lead media story to produce a crime fiction idea.

I once read a small story in the back of a newspaper about a kid in New York City who had been shot in a gang dispute and forced to live the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Then, many years after the shooting, the bullet—which doctors had never been able to remove from his spinal cord—somehow came loose and traveled to his heart, killing him. I was fascinated by the idea: a murder that took years and years to accomplish. And now the person who shot him would not just be guilty of assault, but charged with murder after all this time. It seemed like a terrific plot line to put in a book, which is what I did!

Another time I saw a small news item about a homeless woman found dead on the streets of New York City. There were no known details about who she was or how she’d gotten there. I decided to do a “what if” about her as the basis for a book. What if she once had dreams that never came true? What if she knew shocking secrets about people in her past life? What if someone murdered her and made it look like just another homeless death to make sure she never revealed her secrets to anyone?

Then there was the real life news story of Aileen Wuornos, one of the few female serial killers in modern crime history, who murdered seven men while she was working as a prostitute in Florida. For me, this story was the springboard for creating a different kind of fictional female serial killer—a beautiful, sexy woman who executed rich and powerful men she wooed into bed just for the thrill of it. My female serial killer was a lot different than Aileen Wuornos. But, once again, it was a news headline that gave me the inspiration.

There are so many stories out there in the news like this. So many ideas just waiting for someone to turn them into a terrific crime fiction thriller. I’ve been lucky working in newsrooms where I got to see so many of these big stories first-hand. But they’re out there for everyone—everywhere—to jump on and turn into their own crime fiction thriller!



About the author

I am a New York City author who writes mystery thrillers under the pen name of **Dana Perry**—and also as R.G. Belsky. My new thriller for Bookouture is *SILENT ISLAND*, the first in a series featuring homicide detective Abby Pearce. Previous titles of mine were *THE SILENT VICTIM*, *THE GOLDEN GIRL*, and *HER OCEAN GRAVE*.

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Andrews & Wilson

Jeffrey Wilson has at one time worked as an actor, a firefighter, a paramedic, a jet pilot, a diving instructor, a Naval officer, and a vascular and trauma surgeon. He also served numerous tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as a Navy combat surgeon, deploying with an east coast-based SEAL team as part of a Joint Special Operations Task Force.

Brian Andrews is a U.S. Navy veteran, nuclear engineer, and former submarine officer. He graduated from Vanderbilt University with a degree in psychology, holds a master's in business from Cornell, and is a Park Leadership Fellow. He is a principal contributor at Career Authors, a site dedicated to advancing the careers of aspiring and published writers: careerauthors.com.

INTERVIEW BY ELISE COOPER

Q. What inspired the concept behind your book *Four Minutes*?

Brian & Jeff: It will probably be a limited series but is open ended right now. We like our stories to start with these “what if” questions. Both of us have backgrounds with the military and other government services. What if someone had a crystal ball to look into the future that can say what can happen? For example, what if days beforehand people knew about 9/11? Then we tied it to the cover Special Forces grounded in real math and physics. We did not want it to be a sci-fi book but rather a techno-thriller.

Q. Could you elaborate on the fundamental premise of the book?

Brian & Jeff: If someone could look forward and anticipate consequences then in the present it is possible to act. It is about gaining intelligence and coming back to the present to stop the event. They do not get a do over and do not know if the mission will really work. This technology could be invented soon. The questions we want to ask: can there be technology that goes into the near future; if so, how could someone manipulate it; what would the limits be? We put these limits where the team could go into the future twenty-eight days and only stay for four minutes. They must use that information in the present to solve the problem.

Q. What implications does the phrase from your book, “everyone wants to see us fail,” carry?

Brian & Jeff: It was not meant to target a real-world administration or political organization. Yet, the powers external to the U.S.: China, Russia, and Iran want to see us fail. They want to tear us down piece by piece, trying to destroy us from within, and trying to destroy us from outside. America needs to be united because when we are divided, we are weak, and our enemies realize it. They cannot beat us in the Cold War, economically and militarily, so they are trying philosophically and politically.

Q. How would you characterize the character Moody in the story?

Brian & Jeff: Confident, charming, smooth, secretive, and the rest of the team do not trust him. When we first started writing him, we were not sure if he was a bad guy or good guy. He is apologetic for lying to his team, but

not when it will help them complete the mission, safeguarding the country. He sees the need to make compromises and hard choices.

Q. Does your personal military experience influence the portrayal of command decisions in the book?

Brian & Jeff: Yes. This is what it is like when in command. Some people must put themselves in danger. For instance, as a submarine officer, Brian had to wear a radiation monitor. This team is making a big physical sacrifice. Our combined military service is what drives the engine of a lot of our work including the missions.

Q. Without focusing solely on the mathematical and physical aspects, what exactly is Spooky Time as mentioned in your book?

Brian & Jeff: Conservation of time. When the team jumps the present is still moving by four minutes. When they return from their jump, they will always return to the present four minutes after they left. But what if they jumped two minutes into the future? The present would have moved by four minutes. We put in the Einstein quote, “The past, present, and future is an illusion.” There is a diagram in the book that explains it.

Q. Since you are also writing in the Tom Clancy universe, could you discuss your new book *Act of Defiance*?

Brian & Jeff: This, our first installment in the Clancy Universe, comes on the fortieth anniversary of *The Hunt for Red October*. We feel Tom Clancy invented the techno-thriller genre with that book. We are updating this story with the new technology and the new warriors.

Q. Were you able to incorporate actual military technology in your portrayal of modern submarine warfare?

Brian & Jeff: The Navy gave us unprecedented access to the modern submarine force. We were able to go on the USS Indiana, a Virginia class submarine, and toured the Black Fish. We were able to see what a day is like for this current submarine officer. We are indebted to the Navy and the admiral in charge of the submarine force. The U.S. Navy

should have been listed as a co-author since they supported this project.

Q. You recreated an iconic scene from the Jack Ryan series in your book, but with a twist involving his daughter, Katie. Could you explain this choice?

Brian & Jeff: This scene was not in the book but was in the movie. We wanted to play homage to the book and the movie by picking out some key, super cool incidents that we wanted to replicate in this story. This was an iconic scene in the film. We used a tightrope to put just enough of the nostalgia without alienating people who never read the book or saw the movie.

Q. How do you describe the character Katie, who seems to embody traits of her father, Jack Ryan?

Brian & Jeff: This series has two dozen books. She is an original character, but readers do not know much about her. We can build up her character. Katie is sensitive, confident, thoughtful, analytical, and she has studied Konstantin just as her father studied Ramius in the first book. She is literally Jack Ryan's DNA because she is his daughter, very similar to her dad. Yet, she does not see it. Just like the hilarious commercial that says, “you turned into your parents.”

Q. What are your future plans for the *Four Minutes* series and other upcoming books?

Brian & Jeff: The next *Four Minutes* book is dependent on the screenplay because it is optioned for television or the movies. Since the first book is left with a cliffhanger our intention is to figure out what happens to Moody and some of the other characters.

The next Clancy book is titled *Defense Protocol*, coming out in November/December of this year. The plot has a what if with China making moves on Taiwan. Katie is trying to prevent having American and China in a shooting war.

The next *Tier One* book is titled *Ember*, coming out in July of next year. John Dempsey is back with his team. But the team must handle another new threat.

Sons of Valor IV will come out in summer of 2025. It has not been written yet.



Andrews & Wilson's latest: *Four Minutes*

Special Operations Chief Tyler Brooks might not know quantum mechanics, or have an eidetic memory, but he is the very best in the world at one thing: leading covert ops. When an unpredictable enemy causes the catastrophic loss of his entire SEAL team, Brooks is recruited by Pat Moody to lead a new elite squad, Task Force Omega. Moody's promise—access to mind-bending tech that grants a glimpse of the future.

Together with Navy Intelligence Specialist Zee Williams, Brooks leads a new kind of counterterrorism task force, one that collects intel from the future to stop attacks in the present. But there's a catch. Each mission can only last four minutes. Stakes quickly escalate when Omega discovers an unprecedented future attack against America threatening the lives of millions—including Tyler's daughter.

Despite their prescient advantage, Brooks and Williams find themselves thwarted at every turn as they try to stop the plot. With the country on the brink of nuclear war, Tyler's daughter in mortal danger, and a commanding officer they're not sure they can trust, Omega Team faces a terrible dilemma: Even if you know the future, is four minutes enough time to change it?

CRAFTING A CONVINCING MYSTERY PLOT TWIST

Writing the perfect mystery plot twist isn't just about pulling the rug out from under the audience; it's an art form, a delicate dance of misdirection, surprise, and ultimately, satisfaction.

What makes a plot twist not just good, but great? It's all about the setup, the sleight of hand that the writer performs while the reader's gaze is elsewhere. Take, for example, Agatha Christie's

classic, *And Then There Were None*. Christie sets her stage on an isolated island, where the characters, and the readers, are cut off from the world, creating a pressure cooker of tension and suspicion. The brilliance of the twist comes from Christie's masterful deployment of clues that are in plain sight yet overlooked, leading to a revelation that is both shocking and, in retrospect, inevitable.

On the screen, the film *Fight Club*, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel, offers a modern masterclass in the plot twist. The narrative weaves through the psyche of its protagonist in such a way that when the twist hits, it forces the viewer to reevaluate everything they've witnessed. The key here is the depth of character development, which lays the groundwork for a twist that is as believable as it is unexpected.

The foundation of a convincing mystery plot twist lies in the details. Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* teaches us the value of embedding the twist within a complex web of events and characters. Chandler peppers his narrative with red herrings and dead ends, but the twist, when it comes, ties together seemingly unrelated threads in a way that makes the reader question why they didn't see it coming.

However, crafting a twist that feels both surprising and fair is a tightrope walk. Consider *The Sixth Sense* by M. Night Shyamalan, a film that executes this balance with aplomb. The twist works because it plays on the assumptions of the audience, leading them down a path of misunderstanding while providing all the necessary clues to the truth. The art lies in making the audience complicit in their own deception, leading to a revelation that reshapes the narrative in a new and thrilling light.

To achieve this, a writer must understand the importance of pacing. The plot must build in such a way that the

twist, when it arrives, feels like a natural yet unexpected culmination of the narrative. Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a prime example of pacing done right. The film takes its time, building suspense and developing its characters, so when the twist arrives, it's both a shock and a resolution to the carefully constructed tension.

Dialogue also plays a crucial role in setting up a successful plot twist. The way characters interact with one another, what they say, and perhaps more importantly, what they don't say, can provide the audience with the clues needed to piece together the mystery. *The Usual Suspects*, with its iconic twist, showcases how dialogue can be used to mislead the audience while simultaneously providing the keys to unlock the mystery.

For writers looking to craft their own unforgettable plot twist, the advice is to study these masters of the genre. Observe how they weave their narratives, how they develop their characters, and how they plant the seeds of the twist throughout their stories. It's about creating a balance between misdirection and fairness, ensuring that when the twist comes, it doesn't just surprise the audience but also provides a deeper understanding of the narrative.

A great plot twist is not just a surprise, but a revelation that changes the way we see the story. It requires careful planning, a deep understanding of the narrative, and, most importantly, respect for the audience. Whether it's through the written word or the silver screen, the goal is the same: to craft a moment that leaves the audience astounded, reflecting on the clues and foreshadows they missed along the way.

Remember, the best plot twists are those that the audience can look back on and see the groundwork laid out before them, making the revelation not just surprising, but satisfying. It's a delicate art, one that demands attention to detail, character, and pacing. But for those who master it, the reward is a place among the legends of mystery writing, where their work continues to surprise and delight audiences, turning skeptics into believers, and making even the most hard-nosed of reporters tip their hat in respect.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS SUMMER



The Intruder

Peter Blauner

After more than twenty-five years, this tour-de-force has been thankfully republished, breathing new life into a tale that resonates even more with today's societal issues.

Crafted by Peter Blauner, an acclaimed author, journalist, and television producer, and winner of the Edgar Award, this narrative interweaves the lives of two men on divergent

paths. Jake, a successful lawyer, enjoys a life filled with the hallmarks of success: a loving wife, Dana, a son, and a beautiful city home, symbolizing wealth, status, and stability.

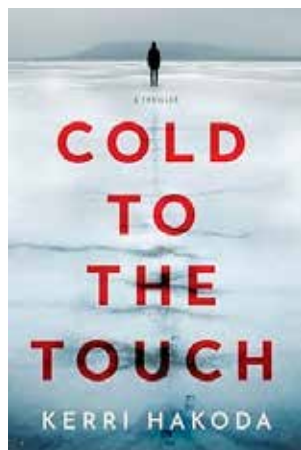
In stark contrast, John Gates faces a gradual descent into despair. Formerly a subway motorman for the Transit Authority, his life unravels after a rail accident leads to his dismissal, and tragedy strikes with the death of his beloved daughter in a heartrending accident. This calamity precipi-

tates the dissolution of his once happy marriage, and John's life spirals downwards. Homelessness ensues as he is forced onto the streets, scavenging for change and seeking solace in fleeting moments of sanity through medication.

Their worlds collide when John, in a desperate state, meets Dana, a psychological social worker, at the ER. Misinterpreting her professional kindness, John becomes fixated on the Schiff family, convinced that Jake has robbed him of his life and loved ones due to a bizarre twist of fate. His relentless harassment escalates, compelling Jake to protect his family at all costs. In a moment of misguided judgment, Jake enlists the help of Philip Cardi, a local contractor with mob connections, and faces John in a confrontation that tragically ends in death, altering Jake's life irreversibly.

Peter Blauner masterfully crafts a tense and suspenseful narrative, leading to a dramatic climax that skillfully ties together the complex threads of this enthralling story.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



Cold to the Touch

Kerri Hakoda

Anchorage Detective De-Havilland (Havi) Beans is disappointed when he stops for his regular coffee at Snow Bunny Baristas and finds his favorite barista not there and the kiosk closed.

Not only does Jolene Nilsson make the best coffee, Havi also enjoys his morning chats with the college student, who like him, grew up in a small

Alaskan town. His concerns about her are later realized when her naked body is found lying in the snow.

With no trace evidence left on Jolene's body, except for a single white rose found lying nearby, the police have little idea who could have done this to the beautiful young woman. Two days later, another young barista is found dead with all the hallmarks of the first murder, and again no forensic evidence except a single white rose. Havi is concerned that they have a serial killer on their hands.

Set just before Christmas in Anchorage, the cold, bleak atmosphere of winter in Alaska works well to set the scene,

and the inclusion of chapters narrated by the killer and his victims add to the build-up of danger and tension. Like his siblings, Havi was named after an aircraft by his bush pilot father. A gentle, part indigenous, part Japanese Buddhist, he keeps a cool head in danger and prefers reasoning with suspects rather than shooting first.

Since Havi's last partner retired, the only other unpaired detective on the force, Ed Heller, has so far refused to be partnered with him. However, as the case develops, they are forced to work together, which they do surprisingly well along with a female FBI agent, Isabelle O'Reilly, sent in from Portland. Short staffed and struggling to review hours of CCTV footage, they also receive some unexpected help from Cam, a young, autistic bus driver. Havi's ex-girlfriend Raisa Ingalls is also called on as an expert and it's clear she and Havi have some unfinished business.

This is an excellent debut novel—a very well written police procedural with some dark and chilling undertones in the atmospheric Alaskan winter. Hakoda has created a wonderful character in Beans, a man with many dimensions and flaws in his personality and personal life. It would be great to see him feature again in a sequel or series.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



If Something Happens to Me

Alex Finlay

Five years ago, Ryan Richardson's life was irrevocably changed by a harrowing night—he was attacked, his girlfriend Ali was abducted, and only the absence of concrete evidence (coupled with a competent lawyer) prevented him from facing charges.

However, now, after all this time, Ali's car has been discovered submerged, and a trip to Italy confronts Ryan with the only other person he recalls from that night—the man missing pinky fingers, last seen as Ryan was forcibly separated from the girl he loved. Unraveling the mystery will take him around the globe, but only with support from back home will he finally uncover what transpired all those years ago.

Alex Finlay consistently delivers fast-paced thrillers, and *If Something Happens to Me* dives straight into the heart of the mystery without delay. From the outset, it's full throttle—

maintaining its pace right through to the breathless conclusion.

In addition to Ryan's narrative, we also explore the lives of the new deputy Poppy McGee and mobster Shane O'Leary; their wildly divergent situations, characters, and storylines seem impossible to merge—until they do, with Finlay's masterful storytelling weaving all the threads into a cohesive big picture that snaps perfectly into place.

The thrill of a twist is unmatched, and there's no one who can surprise me as consistently as this author. The story doesn't merely become a race to discover the truth—balancing this aspect is a challenge—yet readers will find the journey just as rewarding as the destination.

Finlay crafts characters that are a pleasure to read about, mysteries that captivate, and novels that are as exhilarating as they are intricate. This blend makes for an invariably exceptional reading experience with his books, and *If Something Happens to Me* adds another distinguished accolade to his already remarkable repertoire.

Reviewed by Fiona Cook



Point Zero

Matsumoto Seicho

Seicho Matsumoto is considered one of the greatest Japanese writers of the crime genre. His latest book available in English is an example of his trademark writing style, where he mingles crime with psychology and the lives of ordinary people.

Set in the 1950s, *Point Zero* is the story of Teiko, who has recently entered into an arranged

marriage with Kenichi Uhara. She doesn't know much about him before they get married, but hopes to settle down to a nice, quiet life in Tokyo. She isn't sure of her husband in their four-day long honeymoon and suspects that he has been with women before, but hopes to know him better.

Soon after the honeymoon, however, Uhara has to leave for Kanazawa, where he had been posted till now to wrap up his work before he can shift to Tokyo. But he never returns. Teiko visits Kanazawa to locate her husband's whereabouts. Nothing comes to light and Teiko is unsure of what to do next when Uhara's brother reaches Kanazawa to help Teiko, only to be murdered. His tragic death opens the possibility that

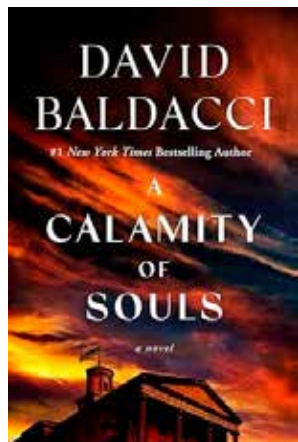
Uhara might be dead, too.

As Teiko digs deeper, she realizes that the reason for these killings lies in the past, when some Japanese women used to work as "pan-pan girls," or pleasure women, for the American GIs after the war.

Quite unlike its contemporary counterparts, the novel doesn't move at a break-neck speed. Neither do we get the in-vogue short chapters and multiple POVs. The story is told at a steady but gentle pace, almost throughout from the perspective of Teiko as she travels further and further in the past to discover what led to her husband's disappearance. The book is also heavily tied-up with social mores of the then Japanese society and the idea of respectability when it comes to women.

Point Zero moves from Tokyo to Kanazawa and further inward and Matsumoto gives his readers descriptions of the desolate yet beautiful areas that don't often come into the notice of a reader who is not from the country. Teiko emerges as a strong character. She is a woman who takes things in her own hands and does the best she can to unravel the mystery of a man she has known for a very short time. Even though the book is set in a specific time period, it maintains its charm for the reader.

Reviewed by Dr. Sneha Pathak



A Calamity of Souls

David Baldacci

It's 1968, and it's been fourteen years since the United States Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of public schools and four years since the Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation in public facilities, like drinking fountains and bathrooms.

This makes no difference in Freeman County, Virginia, where Whites and Blacks live

on opposite sides of the McHenry River, and Blacks are expected to know their place.

Black maids and nannies can be seen working on the White side of town, but Black men are considered dangerous and not welcome in any occupation. Thus, it's unusual for Black army veteran Jerome Washington to be employed by Anne and Leslie Randolph, one of the wealthiest and most prominent White couples in Freeman County. Jerome drives the elderly Randolphs around in their car, works in their yard, and repairs things around the property.

Jerome gets paid every Friday, forty dollars cash, which he needs for his wife and three children. One Friday, Jerome

knocks on the Randolphs' back door several times, and getting no answer, reluctantly ventures into the house.

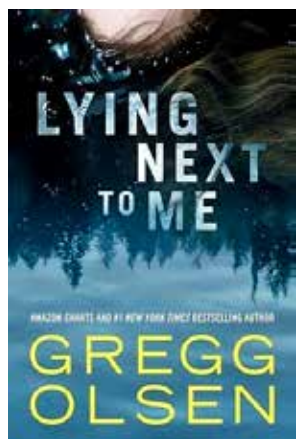
Shortly afterward, Jerome is on his knees, his hands shackled behind his back, being viciously billy-clubbed by a white policeman, while another cop looks on. Anne and Leslie Randolph are in the dining room, dead and covered with blood. Jerome is arrested for murder, and in Freeman County, that means Jerome's conviction is almost a certainty.

Even in Freeman County, however, a defendant is entitled to a lawyer, and White criminal defense attorney Jack Lee takes the case. Thirty-three-year-old Jack has always been aware of the unfair treatment of Blacks, vaguely thought it was wrong, but never did anything about it. Jack now has his chance, and he means to mount the best possible defense for Jerome Washington.

The book is a compelling courtroom drama and a realistic depiction of the struggle for Black civil rights. In his foreword, author David Baldacci explains that he grew up in Virginia during the 1960s and 1970s, and has personal knowledge of the racism, offensive language, and right-wing politics of the era.

The book is a page-turner that's well worth reading, especially since America still struggles with race relations.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer



Lying Next to Me

Gregg Olsen

In this dark and character-based mystery, three historic cabins are rented for Memorial Day weekend at Hood Canal in Mason County, Washington. Adam and Sophie Warner and their three-year-old daughter Aubrey have arrived to unplug and to work on their marriage. In a nearby cabin is Teresa Dibley and her two grandchil-

dren. The third cabin has another couple, Kristen and Connor Moss.

While Adam and Aubrey are out on the water, he sees Sophie abducted by a stranger. The only comforting thing about the situation for Adam is that one of the detectives is Lee Husemann, an old friend of his. However, things aren't what they seem and lies abound.

Many, but not all, of the characters are unlikeable in this story. Adam puts his work ahead of his family. He doesn't usually show his feelings to others, and he likes to be in control. Sophie is confident, but keeps things inside and has

mood swings. Detective Lee Husemann likes to be right, likes to solve puzzles, and usually does things by the books. Can she put her history with Adam aside and be unbiased in the investigation? Lee's partner, Detective Zach Montrose, seems quick to jump to conclusions. Kristen is smart, in line for a partnership at her Seattle law firm, desperately wants a child, and is intense. Connor has an alcohol problem and tends to be malleable. Teresa is concentrating on her grandchildren and trying to get custody of them.

The characterization and atmosphere in this novel are great. Readers get a good feeling for them and the intensity of the situation. The story is a quick read that has several puzzles that need to be put together. Can Lee and Zach solve the case?

The plot is somewhat dark and twisty with a few surprises along the way. The clues are there, but it took me a while to put them together. Several threads are woven throughout the story including, but not limited to, lies, secrets, trust, friendship, betrayal, marriage, and desire for a child. Overall, this novel was intriguing and compelling.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Storm Child

Michael Robotham

When Cyrus Haven first met Evie Cormac she was a damaged and troubled teenager who had been through horrific childhood trauma. After being rescued, she wasn't able to cope with a foster home and so was placed in a secure children's unit under a new name to protect her from those who want her dead for what she knows about them.

After her release from the unit, forensic psychologist Cyrus took her under his wing and taught her how to navigate the world while she finished growing up. Now at twenty-two, she lodges in Cyrus' house in Nottingham and has made great progress, finishing school and working part time at an animal shelter. She still suffers from PTSD and has never been able to tell Cyrus much about her childhood or how she came to the UK from Albania.

Cyrus has talked Evie into joining him for a few days at Cleethorpes Beach in Lincolnshire, even though she can't swim. As they are relaxing and eating ice cream, bodies start to wash up on the beach. Seventeen refugees died trying

to make their way from France to the UK in a boat that has been deliberately hit and sunk. Two women are still missing and only a young boy has been found alive, clinging to some wreckage. The sight of the bodies throws Evie into a state of extreme shock, triggering her to start remembering the past she thought was long buried.

Evie's memories of her childhood and how she came to be on a boat seeking refuge in the UK with her mother and sister lead her and Cyrus to travel to Scotland for answers. In particular, answers about a man Evie has recognized from her journey, one who may still be involved in present day trafficking. Cyrus knows it's important for Evie to find out as much as she can about her past if she is to heal and move on with her life. What they find is a dark and evil network of power and privilege and little regard for the lives of helpless people. But there is also a surprise revelation in store for Evie which will give her some closure and makes for a very pleasing ending.

Well paced with a slow tension building to a gripping climax, this is a terrific addition to the series. Although this could be enjoyed as a stand-alone, the series really deserves to be enjoyed from the beginning to understand the background and the relationship between Evie and Cyrus. A totally engrossing and captivating read from a master storyteller.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



A Forgotten Kill

Isabella Maldonado

This narrative is the second installment in the Special Agent Daniela Vega series, which continues to exceed expectations. Maldonado's novel, while part of a series, stands strong on its own, offering readers a comprehensive backstory. With over two decades of law enforcement experience, Maldonado infuses this gripping tale with authenticity, ex-

ploring the dark interplay between Daniela and a malevolent predator known as "Connor."

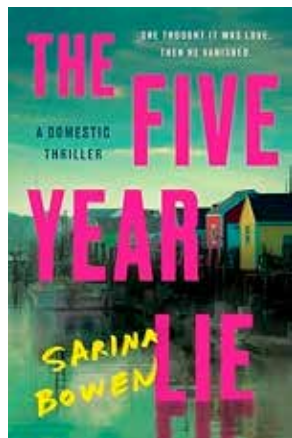
Daniela Vega's journey begins with a traumatic discovery at seventeen when she finds her mother in a shocking scene, leading to her mother's commitment to a psychiatric facility. Daniela's subsequent path into the military and then the FBI is marked by her exceptional skills and determination. After a decade, with her mother showing signs of lucidity, Daniela is drawn back into the unresolved mystery of her father's death.

Now on administrative leave, Daniela seizes the opportunity to investigate her father's case with the help of NYPD Detective Mark Flint and Detective Chapman. Despite Chapman's reluctance to reopen the case, Daniela's expertise in pattern recognition propels her into the heart of a serial killer investigation, uncovering a trail of victims linked by disturbing patterns and a lack of forensic evidence.

Isabella Maldonado crafts a complex, riveting narrative with precise, gritty prose that builds suspense and tension to an unputdownable climax. The story takes readers on a tumultuous journey, filled with clues, suspects, and misleading trails, challenging them to solve the mystery alongside the protagonist.

Maldonado's insightful and engaging storytelling, enriched by her extensive experience in law enforcement, makes for an enthralling addition to the crime fiction genre. This novel not only offers a thrilling experience but also leaves readers eagerly anticipating more adventures with FBI Special Agent Daniela Vega.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



The Five Year Lie

Sarina Bowen

The Five Year Lie kicks off with a captivating, heart stopping prologue designed to grab readers' attention while enticing them into shutting off their phones, setting aside all snacks and drinks and settling in for the duration, so plan accordingly. You don't want any distractions once starting this mysterious story.

Ariel Cafferty is a single mother living in her mother's guesthouse while pursuing her passion of glassmaking and putting in required appearances at the family business, the Chime Co. Five years prior, the man Ariel loved ghosted her—disappearing without a trace, unaware she was carrying his child. Years later, she reads his obituary in a newspaper, effectively closing that chapter of her life. Drew was a programmer with her family's cybersecurity company, secretly exploring suspicions of fraudulent activity when he left.

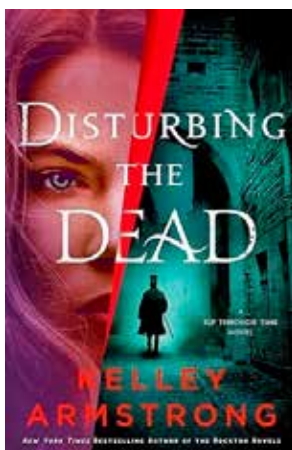
In the present, Ariel is sitting in a business meeting when a disturbing text pings her phone—a text that rocks her to the core. A text from a dead man asking her to meet him immediately. Is this a cruel hoax or is Drew alive? Needing

answers, Ariel goes to the meeting spot, but no one shows. Confused and unsettled, Ariel begins digging into the past, looking for answers about what really happened to Drew. What she uncovers alarms her, leaving her wondering if she ever really knew the man she loved at all and quite certain that someone has been lying to her all along. Pushing ahead, it's soon obvious someone doesn't want the truth to surface. Can Ariel solve the mystery of what happened to Drew before the same danger claims her and her son?

Through concise, alternating chapters of past and present, a chilling story of deceit, secrets, and family drama emerges. The past becomes known via Drew's point of view, and readers are apprised of present events through Ariel's point of view. A sinister tone drives the plot forward at a steadily increasing pace with mini shockers keeping characters and readers on their toes. Bowen does an excellent job of incorporating the dangers posed to careless, unsuspecting victims of technology and cyber security schemes into a riveting plot line that's relevant today. Long time readers of her work will appreciate the well-developed, relatable characters like those everyone loves from her contemporary romance stories.

Highly recommended to fans of good mysteries and engaging romance suspense.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



Disturbing the Dead

Kelley Armstrong

A murder mystery and time travel combine in a historical setting in this third book in the Rip Through Time series.

Modern day homicide detective Mallory Atkinson is becoming more comfortable living in Victorian Scotland. She's inhabiting the body of a housemaid who was attacked in the same Edinburgh alley as Mallory, but 150 years ago.

Mallory is enjoying her job as assistant to undertaker and medical examiner Dr. Duncan Gray and assisting him and Detective Hugh McCreadie in a variety of cases.

Mallory and her friends are invited to a mummy unwrapping at the home of Sir Alastair Christie. When their host is missing, Gray and Mallory are asked to step in and do the unwrapping. All doesn't go well.

Mallory is a character with plenty of depth. She's hard-working, kind, relatable, loves puzzles, and is an idealist. She's good at seeing clues and connections in people's

speech, mannerisms, and expressions. While she makes for a strong female protagonist that readers can cheer on, she flouts convention and is sarcastic as well as being an independent thinker unafraid to speak her mind, which isn't normal for women in Victorian times.

Gray is passionate about his work, enthusiastic, confident, occasionally relaxed and teasing. He's a pioneer in the field of forensics, has an eye for detail, and has a scientific curiosity. Isla, one of Gray's sisters, is a chemist who is brilliant, strong-willed, and kindhearted. McCreadie is clever, good-natured, and a bit of an adventure hound. The remaining supporting cast of characters are well-developed and provide insight into individuals in various roles in a Victorian household as well as those they interact with.

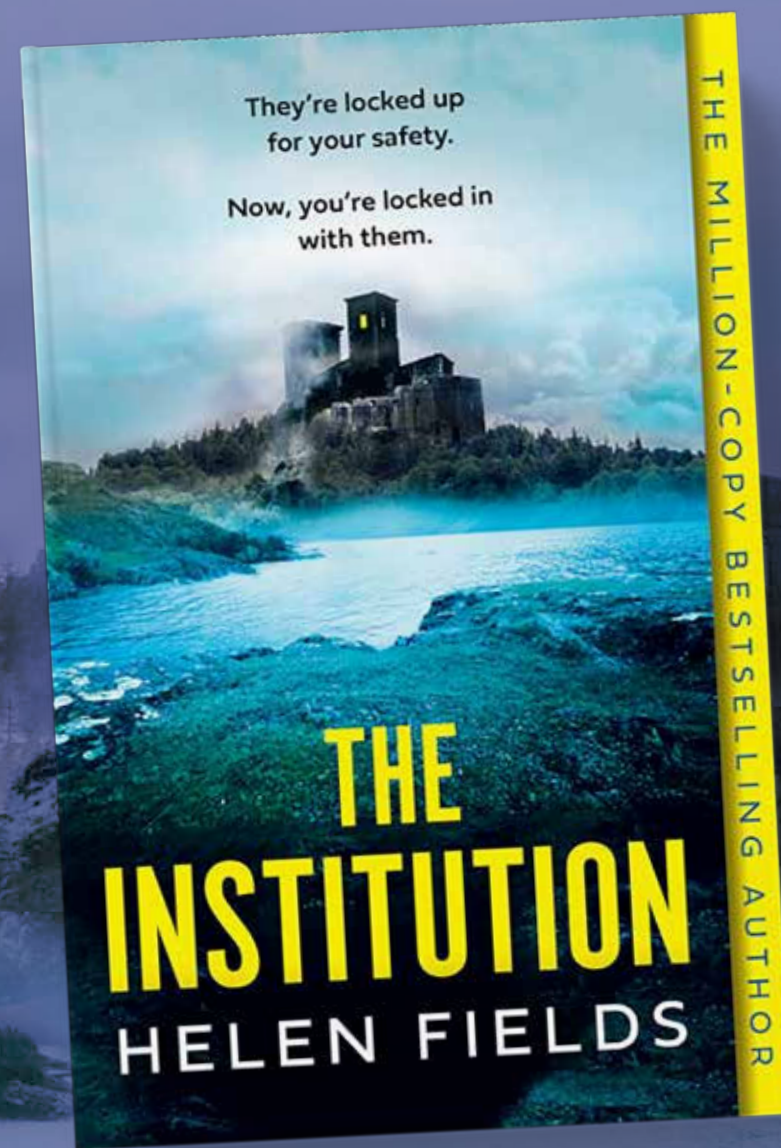
Kelley Armstrong has a fluid writing style that quickly brings readers into the well-paced story. They also get insight into the state of police forensics during this early era and a few insights into how investigations and searches occur in 1869 in Scotland. There are some twists in the storyline, and the ending has plenty of action. The world-building is wonderful and feels accurate for the times.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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