



SISTERS in CRIME
CROAK & DAGGER
 ALBUQUERQUE CHAPTER



THE NOOSE LETTER

Volume VI, Number 2—March 2010

†Expert Testimony†

From the Prez

My last column mentioned your Board's intention to provide more social events in addition to our regular meetings. The January Albuquerque Little Theater play, *Dial M for Murder*, and the dinner were very successful. About 24 of our members had a lot of fun and a good time. We now have two more events planned and hope you will be able to join us.

There have been a lot of mysteries and thrillers about Los Alamos set either during the Manhattan Project and the war or later. What actual events or characters, if any, provided a basis for the story? Even more interesting, what events or characters could be the basis for future stories? A physicist, perhaps a Nobel prize winner, as an amateur sleuth? Conflicts and jealousies in a small, closed society under tremendous pressure (a larger, but in some ways similar, setting to the country estates used by the golden age writers)?

The next *Nooseletter* will review some of these books, and our August meeting will focus on Los Alamos. Then, on September 11 (a Saturday), we will have an event at the Atomic Museum (now called the National Museum of Nuclear Science and History) on Eubank and Southern. We will have a lunch and a docent-led tour of the Museum. This will be your chance to find out what did happen, what didn't happen, what might have happened, and what could have happened. A few facts and a little imagination can work wonders. We can also see their 45-minute movie, *Secrets, Lies, and Atomic Spies*.

We are still working out the details, but the lunch will probably be in the \$10-12 range. Due to space limitations, we can only accommodate 30 people, so if you are interested, email Rob Kresge (rkresge@comcast.net) for a reservation.

The other event will be Sunday, June 6, at 2 p.m. at the Adobe Theater, where they are presenting *Lucky Stiff*, a musical mystery comedy based on Michael Butterworth's novel, *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*. It involves an English shoe salesman, a corpse, \$6 million in diamonds, and a vacation in Monte Carlo. We are still working out the details, but may be able to use one of their rooms for a party afterwards. The tickets will be about \$13. Again if you are interested, email Rob Kresge at the address above.

If you have other ideas for events, please talk to any of your Board members. Thanks. ♦

—Olin Bray

Don't Miss It! **Tuesday, March 23, at 7 p.m.**

Our April speaker will be our own Fred Aiken, discussing "the business side of writing."

Fred has taught Science at Rio Grande High School in Albuquerque for the past nine years, following a highly successful 3½-decade career as a Professional Engineer.

He is a published writer who has studied the publishing industry for the past 15 years and currently serves on the boards of Croak & Dagger and Southwest Writers.

The Albuquerque Croak & Dagger chapter of Sisters in Crime welcomes mystery fans, readers, and writers who want to enjoy felonious fun, absolutely criminal companionship and sensational speakers.

“Back by popular demand,” our April speaker will be Bob Gassaway on “The Autopsy as Puzzle Solving.”

A dead body coming through the back door of the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator is a puzzle—each one with medical, social, and legal ramifications. The Forensic pathologists at OMI examine about 3,000 bodies a year to answer two questions: the cause of death and the manner of death. Sometimes the clues are as obvious as a gunshot wound; other times they are as subtle as a full bladder or a few chips of bone.

Bob Gassaway has seen dozens of autopsies and will describe how pathologists solve the mystery of the dead body and how their analyses play into police death investigations.

Bob has been a news reporter and editor, a war correspondent, a paramedic, a volunteer deputy sheriff, a sociologist, and a journalism professor. He now writes mystery novels.

Meetings are held in the police briefing room of the James Joseph Dwyer Memorial Substation, 12700 Montgomery NE (one block east of Tramway). Unless otherwise noted, programs are free and open to the public.



Sisters in Crime was founded in 1986. *The mission of Sisters in Crime shall be “to promote the professional development and advancement of women crime writers to achieve equality in the industry.”*

Our vision is: “Raising professionalism and achieving equity among crime writers.”

And our motto is: “SinC into a good mystery!”

Check Out the Croak & Dagger Website for all your Croak & Dagger information needs.

www.croak-and-dagger.com

- Upcoming Programs
- 2008 Meeting Schedule
- Membership Form
- Speakers Bureau
- Links to Mystery Websites & Websites for Your Favorite Croak & Dagger Authors
- *The Nooseletter* Archive

IN THE LOOP

All members are invited to join Croak & Dagger’s online Yahoo discussion group. Exchange information about mystery books, movies, and TV shows; share news about local and national mystery events; and participate in occasional online classes. Join in! E-mail moderator Nancy Varian at nancy.varian@yahoo.com for sign-up instructions.

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I Love a Mystery – *Don't You?*

Here is some more trivia for the mystery lover, thanks to Maxine Hermann of the Delaware Valley chapter of SinC (these quizzes originally appeared in *Belles Lettres*, the newsletter of DVSinC).



1. Agatha Christie wrote some non-mysteries over the years, using the pen name:
 - A. *Clarissa Clare*
 - B. *Mary Westmacott*
 - C. *Margaret Miller*
2. Two presidential children have mysteries credited to their names. Can you remember one? How about two?
 - A. *Margaret Truman*
 - B. *Alice Roosevelt Longworth*
 - C. *Amy Carter*
 - D. *Elliot Roosevelt*
3. The following writers have two things in common. Can you name them? (Okay, this is a toughie, so extra points if you get both.)
 - A. *John Steinbeck*
 - B. *Edith Wharton*
 - C. *Earnest Hemingway*
 - D. *Edna Ferber*
4. *An Expert in Murder* is a novel by Nicola Lipson, who used a famous British writer as her main character. That writer was:
 - A. *Margery Allingham*
 - B. *Ruth Rendell*
 - C. *Josephine Tey*
5. What do Alain Delon, Matt Damon, Barry Pepper, and Ian Hart have in common?
 - A. *They were all friends of author Patricia Highsmith*
 - B. *They were all in a TV version of Strangers on a Train*
 - C. *They've all played Tom Ripley in various media*
6. Many of Martha Grimes's mysteries featuring Inspector Richard Jury are named for and take place in:
 - A. *Law Courts*
 - B. *Pubs*
 - C. *Universities*
7. Margery Allingham hinted that her private detective was really a member of the Royal Family and so had to use the alias of Albert Campion. What's a "campion"?
 - A. *A Bell Tower*
 - B. *An English Game*
 - C. *A flower*

You won't find the answers in this *Nooseletter*—send your guesses to the editor, and the reader who gets the most correct answers will get a prize at a future meeting. Have fun!

For Our “Mutual Security”

José Toro, a former intelligence and criminal investigations officer, was the January Croak & Dagger chapter speaker, and even those of us who don't read, much less hope to write, spy novels were glued to our seats by his stories of real cloak-and-dagger operations—as well as the mistakes often made in intelligence gathering.

José explained how intelligence works with a circle illustration. At 12 o'clock is “Requirements,” or requests from various agencies for information on a specific topic. These requests then go to “Collection” of information at 3 o'clock, which can originate with any government agency. At 6 o'clock is “Analysis,” where the information is “supposed” to be put into perspective. José also talked about the effect of politics on intelligence gathering and how political interests can distort content, most famously recently in the case of the reported but never found WMDs in Saddam Hussein's Iraq (interestingly, the subject of a new movie, *Green Zone*). José believes that many of the problems with intelligence occur in “Dissemination” (at 9 o'clock on that circle), at which point the information gathered and analyzed is passed on to the end user.

Despite the almighty Jack Bauer and other heroes of action thrillers, there are several areas that Intelligence has little control over, particularly the threats of biological weapons, cyber attacks, and the activities of home-grown terrorists. “There are a lot of Tim McVey's still around.” (And even some Jihad Janes, apparently.)

And intelligence still isn't shared equally among agencies with their own agendas. José's employer was the Defense Intelligence Agency, created by Robert McNamara when he was Secretary of Defense under President Johnson with the purpose at the time of trying to consolidate agencies. To the contrary, the National Defense system has mushroomed since McNamara's time, and we saw after 9/11/01 that they're still not talking to each other nearly enough

Despite all the cooks stirring the broth, clues are missed—the so-called “Christmas bomber” being a recent example. The suspect's own father had reported him to a U.S. consulate as potentially dangerous, “chatter” on intelligence networks had been rife with stories about “some Nigerians” (the suspect was Nigerian) threatening to blow up an airplane, he had recently been to Yemen, known as a training ground of al-Qaeda members, and he paid cash for his airline ticket (common in Africa but also with terrorists). No one ever put all the clues together.

As we've learned from other expert speakers, José Toro emphasized that most spy fiction is unrealistic, but he does recommend some books as being more accurate than average: John LeCarre's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (based on the famous Burgess/McLean spy scandal in Britain in the 1960s); David Morell's *Brotherhood of the Rose*; Richard Zakes's *Pirate Coast* (about the military action that generated the phrase “shores of Tripoli” in the Marine hymn); and in nonfiction, *Memoirs of a British Agent* by Bruce Lockart. He also recommended an article by Patrick Radden Keefe in the February 8 issue of *The New Yorker*, titled “The Trafficker,” about the decades-long battle to catch an international arms dealer.

[José Toro is a retired lawyer who has worked in intelligence and criminal investigation for the DIA, the Air Force, and the Navy. He is writing a book based on his experience, titled Mutual Security.]

The Death of the Slush Pile

The following is excerpted from an article in the Wall Street Journal by Katherine Rosman.

In 1991, a book editor at Random House pulled from the heaps of unsolicited manuscripts a novel about a murder that roils a Baltimore suburb. Written by a first-time author named Mary Cahill, *Carpool* was published to fanfare. Ms. Cahill was interviewed on the *Today* show. *Carpool* was a best seller.

That was the last time Random House, the largest publisher in the U.S., remembers publishing anything found in a slush pile. Today, Random House and most of its major counterparts refuse to accept unsolicited material.

Getting plucked from the slush pile was always a long shot—in large part, editors and Hollywood development executives say, because most unsolicited material has gone unsolicited for good reason. But it did happen for some: Philip Roth, Anne Frank, Judith Guest. And so to legions of would-be novelists, journalists and screenwriters who held the hope that finding a gem might catapult them from entry level to expense account—the slush pile represented The Dream.

Now, slush is dead, or close to extinction. Most book publishers have stopped accepting book proposals that are not submitted by agents. Magazines say they can scarcely afford the manpower to cull through the piles looking for the Next Big Thing.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. A primary aim of the slush pile used to be to discover unpublished voices. But today, writing talent isn't necessarily enough. "These days, you need to deliver not just the manuscript but the audience," says agent Jim Levine. "More and more, the mantra in publishing is 'Ask not what your publisher can do for you, ask what you can do for your publisher.'"

In 2008, HarperCollins launched Authonomy.com, a Web slush pile. Writers can upload their manuscripts, readers vote for their favorites, and HarperCollins editors read the five highest-rated manuscripts each month. About 10,000 manuscripts have been loaded so far and HarperCollins has bought four.

As writers try to find an agent—a feat harder than ever to accomplish in the wake of agency consolidations and layoffs—the slush pile has been transferred from the floor of the editor's office to the attaché cases of representatives who can broker introductions to publishing, TV and film executives. The result is a shift in taste-making power onto such agents, managers and attorneys.

Still, discoveries do happen at agencies, including the biggest publishing franchise since *Harry Potter*—even though it basically took a mistake to come together. In 2003, an unknown writer named Stephenie Meyer sent a letter to the Writers House agency asking if someone might be interested in reading a 130,000-word manuscript about teenage vampires. The letter should have been thrown out—an assistant didn't realize that agents mostly expected young adult fiction to weigh in at 40,000 to 60,000 words. She contacted Ms. Meyer and ultimately asked that she send her manuscript. The manuscript was passed on to an agent, who signed Ms. Meyer, and sold *Twilight* to Little, Brown. The most recent sequel in the series, *Breaking Dawn*, sold 1.3 million copies the day it went on sale in August 2008. The latest film grossed more than \$288 million in the U.S.

Book publishers say it is now too expensive to pay employees to read slush that rarely is worthy of publication. At Simon & Schuster, an automated telephone greeting instructs aspiring writers: "Simon & Schuster requires submissions to come to us via a literary agent due to the large volume of submissions we receive each day. Agents are listed in *Literary Marketplace*, a reference work published by R.R. Bowker that can be found in most libraries."

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page W1, 1/22/10. For the full text, go to:
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703414504575001271351446274.html>

Dick Francis **1920-2010**

The following is excerpted from an article by Stanley Reynolds (for the full text, go to www.guardian.co.uk)

Dick Francis was a unique figure, a champion steeplechase jockey who, without any previous apparent literary bent, became an international bestselling writer, the author of 42 crime novels, selling more than 60 million copies in 35 languages.

Right from the start, with *Dead Cert* in 1962, the Dick Francis thriller showed a mastery of lean, witty genre prose in an American style that many clever people in England had attempted to reproduce without much success, and it was a wonder how a barely educated former jump jockey was able to do the trick with such effortless ease. People said his highly educated wife wrote the books for him. It was a mystery that was never satisfactorily solved.

The most dramatic incident in his racing career was also a mystery. In the Grand National at Aintree in 1956, his mount Devon Loch, the Queen Mother's horse, had jumped all the fences and, only 50 yards from the finish, without another horse near him, suddenly collapsed and was unable to continue. There was no question of Francis, like a crooked jockey out of one of his own books, having pulled the horse.

In 1957 it was suggested that Francis had suffered too many injuries in falls and should quit racing while he was ahead. Francis was shattered by this oblique dismissal by the Queen Mother, for whom he had a rather old-fashioned reverence. He asked what he was to do for a living and was told that something always turned up. Francis had wept when Devon Loch fell and he wept again, walking away through Hyde Park. "I nearly flung myself into the Serpentine, I was so depressed," he said, years later.

Born in the Pembrokeshire village of Lawrenny, Francis came from a line of farming gentry and horsemen. He went to a one-class village school, attending on average only three days a week and riding the rest of the time. When the war came, he joined the RAF as an aircraftman and served in the Western Desert. He never flew in combat, and his lack of schooling gave him trouble with navigation.

In 1947, he married Mary Brenchley. A well-off middle-class girl whose main interest was the theatre, she also worked as a publisher's reader. The story goes that Dick and Mary went to see a murder mystery at the Oxford Playhouse and came away thinking they could do better. Be that as it may, Dick produced *Dead Cert* and gave it to Michael Joseph because he had ridden horses for the publisher.

Dick and Mary had a very close and happy marriage, spending seven months of the year travelling and researching, and five months writing the novels. Once Francis was under way, a book appeared every year in time for Christmas. They were all bestsellers, both in Britain and North America. Francis won several gold and silver dagger awards from the Crime Writers' Association and in the US he was made a Mystery Writers of America Grand Master.

The books were unusual in the genre because they did not have a hero like Holmes or Poirot to win the love of the reader. Only Sid Halley, an injured jockey turned detective, makes repeat appearances, in *Odds Against* (1965), *Whip Hand* (1979) and *Come to Grief* (1995). The Francis tales are told in the first person, and the hero/narrator, whether an ill-educated jockey or the son of an earl – Lord Henry Grey in *Flying Finish* (1966) – were always the same upstanding character, all men with a secret sorrow. When asked about his damaged heroes, Francis said he had "to have something to fill up the pages".

After Mary's death in 2000, when no new crime novels appeared, it looked as if Mary might really have written them. But then, six years later, Francis came out of retirement to produce *Under Orders*, which had all the old Francis flavour, followed by *Dead Heat*, then *Silks* (2008) and *Even Money* (2009). Much of the research for the novels was done by Francis's son Felix; his other son, Merrick, was a racehorse trainer and then ran a horse transport business which was the background for the 1992 book *Driving Force*. They both survive him.

ROB'S RANDOM SHOTS

This issue I present two international police procedurals, both written in first person, which are exhausting and disturbing to read, but ultimately worthwhile. Both have won multiple awards.

March Case File Number One

Child 44 by Tom Rob Smith, Grand Central Publishing, New York, 2008, 436 pp (HC).

This is not an easy review to write. It was not an easy book to read. I picked it up last fall from the chapter book exchange and have returned it there since in the hope that some of you may read it. It's cheaper in mass market paperback.

You'll like it if you enjoyed Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park*. It transcends the mystery genre and will stand the test of time as literature.

It wasn't an easy book to read because it's darker than *Gorky Park*, more reminiscent of Solzhenitsyn's four-volume *Gulag Archipelago*. In a nutshell, it's based on the case of real-life Russian serial child killer Andrei Chikatilo.

After a chilling prologue in the famine-devastated Ukraine of the 1930s (a famine engineered by Stalin), the story opens in 1953 Moscow, where we meet Great Patriotic War hero and militia officer Leo Demidov, as he pursues the interests of the state in tracking down its enemies.

Smith takes plenty of time to build up the totalitarian setting, where fear and paranoia reigned, and reason was a luxury unavailable to the state. If you were a suspect, you were guilty, since the state did not make mistakes. And there were no murderers, just enemies of the state. Demidov is a rising star in the MVD (state security) and Smith shows the privileges his family enjoys due to his position, and the precariousness of his position as a jealous underling plots to destroy him.

After he refuses to denounce his wife as an American sympathizer in a charge trumped up by that underling, Leo is demoted and sent with his wife Raisa to an industrial town in the

middle of nowhere. Here he links the story of a murdered child to a similar case he encountered in Moscow just before his demotion. He hears of a few more such cases and wonders what connection there can be. Each—boy or girl—is killed, has an organ removed, and is left with a string around one ankle and a mouthful of dirt.

Despite his own and his family's precarious political position, he's able to enlist allies, at great risk to themselves, and pursues the case to other locales. This draws the attention of his former subordinate in Moscow and a race against time ensues.

The only flaw in this otherwise extraordinary debut novel is the motive of the murderer (we see a couple of killings from his perspective—not for the squeamish) and his connection to Leo. Beyond that preposterous coincidence, this is a highly worthwhile read and Smith has already published a sequel, *The Secret Speech*. I know I'm going to read that one, too. ♦

—Rob Kresge (rkresge777@comcast.net)

Key:

PB = Paperback
TP = Trade paperback
HC = Hardcover

March Case File Number Two

In the Woods by Tana French, Penguin, New York, 2008, 464 pp (PB)

This book was awarded the Best First Novel of 2008 prize by the Mystery Writers of America. In contrast to the above novel, this one involves the Irish police. Like *Child 44*, it's told in an effective and engaging first person voice by the lead detective, Rob Ryan.

The settings couldn't be more different. Contemporary Ireland is portrayed as a bright, sunny, generally fear-free place, but extraordinarily atrocious crimes require a huge amount of resources and take a life-changing toll on the cops who work such cases.

The crime at the heart of this story is the murder of a 12-year-old Katy Devlin at an archeological dig in the Dublin suburb of Knocknaree. But there's some question throughout that it may be the work of a serial killer. In the same woods in 1984, two children of similar age disappeared and were never accounted for.

The survivor of that incident was traumatized 12-year-old Adam Ryan, who moved away, went to school in England, returned to Ireland using the first name Rob, and has risen to be a crack detective in Dublin's Murder Squad.

Ryan's secret (only his partner, Cassie Morgan knows his connection to the earlier crime) puts him in a unique position during this investigation and perhaps in all of mystery fiction. We get to see how the Irish police handle crime scene management, forensics, questioning of witnesses, and how case team members interact. Rob and Cassie, and helper Sam, conduct a highly professional investigation, which gets nowhere and bogs down.

The murdered girl was one of three daughters of a political activist who's trying to get a planned highway diverted around the Knocknaree woods. Was the crime connected to developers' plans for the area? To the young archeological staff? Rob's halting and incomplete memories of that day 25 years earlier provide no insight.

Rob and Cassie have been friends outside the office but have carefully avoided any romantic relationship. When that changes, the case quickly slides into chaos. When they eventually achieve a breakthrough and isolate the actual killer, their relationship and the revelation of Rob's connection to the old case disrupt the Squad's ability to secure legally binding confessions and the team dissolves in mutual recriminations.

Not your usual police procedural in which super-intuitive *Law and Order*-types always get their man, but this is an elegant and promising first novel that you should read.



There's no gore and no child molestation, so the squeamish need not be put off.

Only the last few pages, like the denouement of *Child 44*, disappointed me. I think this book takes a realistic look at the pressures of police work and accurately depicts how not every case gets wrapped up neatly.♦

—Rob Kresge (rkresge777@comcast.net)

Seven Days at Oak Valley, by Ruthie-Marie Beckwith. ABQ Press, 2009, \$14.95

Ruthie-Marie Beckwith creates a most unusual amateur sleuth in *Seven Days at Oak Valley*. Tony Ervin is a resident (aka inmate) of Oak Valley State Training School and Hospital, a mental retardation facility in Tennessee. The story takes place in 1978.

Tony isn't totally disabled, and because he has lived at Oak Valley most of his life and the staff trust him, he has been assigned tasks like delivering mail that give him access to most of the hospital. And the parts he isn't given access to he finds his own way into.

A series of mysterious deaths begins with one of the staff doctors, which doesn't affect Tony greatly—the divide between residents and doctors is too wide—but when a pal of his dies equally mysteriously, Tony starts to wonder. Then he starts to surreptitiously investigate and discovers clues to several suspects and motives.

It's a little difficult to sort out the long cast of characters in *Seven Days at Oak Valley* until a good third of the way into the book, and Tony doesn't take center stage quickly enough. In fact, the first few pages are taken up with rather amateurish descriptions of minor characters, when Tony should have been introduced first. Letting us see the others through his eyes, at least when we first encounter them, would have made for a smoother narrative.

However, once the clumsy first few chapters are out of the way, the plot picks up pace and people and events straighten themselves out as we get to know Tony and his friends, as well as the powers-that-be at Oak Valley who are (not surprisingly) at the top of

the bad-guy list. The local sheriff finally starts to listen to Tony, and although the identity of the killer becomes all too obvious early on, we've gotten interested enough in Tony by then to root for him.

Alas, it's hard to see where Tony could go from here as a series character, but *Seven Days at Oak Valley* is recommended as a glimpse into this unique character. ♦

—Linda Triegel (*ljt23@earthlink.net*)

Did you know...?



According to *Murder Ink* (“perpetrated by” Dilys Winn, Workman Publishing, 1977), the term “private eye” originated, not as an abbreviation of “private investigator,” but with the Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency. The “Pinks” were a combination of today’s Secret Service, FBI, and CIA, and their trademark was a large, unblinking eye—the eye that never sleeps. Allen Pinkerton himself got into the writing business, hiring a series of writers to perpetuate the ever-seeing eye myth in a series of novels published under his name.

Talking About Detective Fiction by P.D. James, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, 198 pp (HC)

P.D. James, born in 1920, grew up during the Golden Age of mysteries, reading Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and the other classic mystery writers, and then started writing mysteries herself. She has written at least 20 books and in 2008 was inducted into the International Crime Writing Hall of Fame. Television adaptations of her novels have occupied multiple seasons on PBS.

In *Talking About Detective Fiction* James provides her perspective on the genre and authors who made it what it is today—and are continuing to make it what it will be tomorrow.

She starts at the beginning with *The Moonstone*, Caleb Williams, and Sherlock Holmes—good stories but not necessarily respected literature at the time.

The genre flowered in its Golden Age under a set of widely accepted, if informal, rules. The story was set in a relatively isolated environment, often a small village or manor house, and had a limited set of characters. A crime, usually a murder, created a disturbance that had to be set right. The focus of the story was the puzzle, solving a murder that was very tidy, un-bloody, and often off the page. The author played fair and let the reader know everything the detective knew. In the end, the murderer was caught, justice prevailed, and balance was restored. The plot was the key and the characters were rarely developed, except perhaps for the series protagonist.

Since the Golden Age pattern worked so well and was so popular, it survived for decades. However, during the same period came what James describes as the very different, darker noir “mean streets” mysteries from Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet that were popular in America. Clearly, Miss Marple and even Peter Wimsey lived in a very different world and had a different perspective on it than Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe.

Following WWII the mystery genre exploded into many subgenres as new (and some older) writers rejected the Golden Age’s rules and constraints. For example, character development became more important, in some cases becoming equal to or even more important than plot. Plots became more realistic. As James points out, many Golden Age plots were elaborate to the point of being unworkable—she specifically mentions Christie’s *Death on the Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express*. However, being unworkable does not mean they were not interesting, well thought-out puzzles and very entertaining reading. “Agatha’s best work,” she says, “...As writing... is not distinguished, but as story it is superb.”

James’s book probably won’t change anyone’s broad outline of how the mystery genre has developed. If anything, she tends to confirm our conventional wisdom about this

history. However, she does it with examples and stories about both the authors and their books. Her stroll through the genre is both insightful and interesting. It is a good read that most mystery fans and authors will enjoy and learn from. ♦

—Olin Bray (ohbray@nmia.com)



Alfred Hitchcock: The Legend Begins. Mill Creek Entertainment Legends Series #20 (4 DVDs).

You never know what you're going to find in the \$5 DVD bin at Walmart, but it pays to browse occasionally among the teen movies, chick flicks, and CGI fantasies. It was there that I found this compilation of Hitchcock movies from the 1920s and 1930s—some classics, some oddities, all in black-and-white, including a couple of episodes of the Master's TV show from the 1950s.

I've yet to watch them all, but the best so far are probably *Sabotage* (1936) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), although it was interesting to see, even in a poor print, the silent film that made Hitchcock known as a director for the first time. *The Lodger*, roughly based on the Jack the Ripper murders, is suspenseful and clever (I hear now and then about a remake, but have yet to see it in theaters).

Six other silents include *The Manxman*, one of the oddities. Not a murder mystery, but plenty of suspense in a tale of two men who love the same woman, much to the distress of all three. The talkies also include the classic *39 Steps* with Robert Donat (still better than the recent *Masterpiece* version, which left out all the good bits...like the handcuffs), the original *Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Secret Agent*, based on *Ashenden*, the Somerset Maugham story about espionage in World War I, starring a very young and elegant John Gielgud. ♦

—Linda Triegel (ljt23@earthlink.net)

Please Silence your Plot Device

Mystery fans often lament the rise of cell phone technology as harming the traditional mystery. True, David and Maddie don't have to find pay phones any more; modern detectives need never be out of touch.

But modern technology gives as much as it takes away. New Mexico PIs often find they can't always get a cell phone signal. How about if your heroine is hiding from the killer in a darkened backstage and her cell phone rings in her purse? What if she were able to make it ring to draw the killer into a trap?

A couple of years ago, police used this new technology to solve an arson case. Homes in a new housing development near Baltimore were set afire in the middle of the night. Who did it? Environmentalists upset that the homes bordered a state wildlife refuge? Nearby property owners upset that low-income housing was being built close to their expensive homes? The construction company called all its security personnel to alert them to the fire, including those off-duty. Phone records showed that one member was not roused in his home, as he claimed. The tower that handled the call to his cell phone was only a half mile from the blaze.

Has anybody else out there learned anything that mystery writers might use as a plot device? Share it with the *Nooseletter* editor and she'll let all of us know about it.

—Rob Kresge (rkresge777@comcast.net)

March 24-27, 2011

Left Coast Crime—The Big Chile, La Fonda Hotel, Santa Fe, NM. Left Coast Crime comes to the City Different!

Guests of Honor: Steve Havill, Margaret Coel;

Toastmaster: Steve Brewer. Information:

www.leftcoastcrime.org/2011 or coordinator

Pari Noskin Taichert's blog,

www.murderati.com. Sign up by March 14, 2010, for the best rate—and watch this space!

Why a Critique Group?

Writers want to write better. Writers want to get published. Writing may be a lonely activity, but sooner or later we have to connect with readers, and one way to know what readers want is to connect with some who are willing to read your book before it's published and help you make it better.

This doesn't mean asking your mom or best friend to read your manuscript. They'll love it. Or if they try to be "objective," they won't be able to tell you why they like one part more than another. So what you need is another writer—or two or three—with whom you can meet regularly and exchange specific suggestions about why your character wouldn't behave that way, why it's hard to tell what's going on in this scene, why the dialogue doesn't sound "real," and how to fix it. Writers all go through the same process, and while we may not be able to see problems in our own work, we can see it in a ms. we haven't slaved over. And, incidentally, analyzing someone else's work helps you with your own.

Find or form a critique group by e-mailing all the writers you know, putting notices up at the library, or taking an ad in your *Nooseletter* (they're free!). The ideal critique group consists of no more than four members. It meets at a neutral location, such as a coffee shop or a library meeting room, so that no one is distracted by playing host. At the first meeting, establish a format—schedule of meetings, how to distribute copies of manuscripts; time limits for comments, etc., even whether communicating online would work better for most members. Here are some other things to look for:

- Everyone is at roughly the same level of writing ability, although the leader/moderator may be at a more advanced level and/or experienced in critiquing.
- Everyone is interested in roughly the same kind of writing, which can be a broad category like genre fiction, or more specific, such as cozy mysteries.
- Everyone should be willing to attend regular meetings, no more than a month apart.

Attend your critique group expecting friendly constructive criticism, not unanimous praise. **Don't:**

- Argue. On the other hand, don't feel you have to accept every suggestion. Just think about them.
- Read aloud. Provide everyone with a copy of 10-12 pages of your novel or a short story or article to be read and annotated before the next session. Your ultimate reader will be looking at the page, not listening to you read it.
- Explain what you meant. Your meaning should be clear from what you wrote. Your future reader can't read your mind, only your words.
- Get hung up on correcting someone's grammar or punctuation. Note the corrections on the page, not out loud.

Do:

- Write down comments that seem useful. Ask for an explanation if you don't understand another member's comment.
- Pay particular attention to any point made by more than one member. They may be detecting a trend in your writing that you may not have noticed.
- Take equal turns. If necessary, set a time limit so the last writer to be critiqued gets the same attention as the first.
- Begin with positive comments, pointing out what the writer did well ("I like the dialogue in this scene"; "The active verbs make the action exciting"), before moving on to problem spots ("Jenny's motivation isn't very clear"; "Do you need all this description?").
- Remain professional and courteous. If serious disagreements arise, take a "time out." If one member is incompatible with the group, or does not play an active useful part, do not hesitate to ask him or her to leave.

Some chapter members have expressed an interest in forming a critique group. So here's a chance to try it to see if you like it. The following unpublished story has been submitted (anonymously, of course) by a C&D member as a test case. Send your comments, based on the suggestions on the previous page, to the editor (newsette@earthlink.net), who is an experienced critique group participant, and she will pass them on to the author and reprint some of the most thoughtful and useful (anonymously of course) in the Nooseletter. (copyright notice on page 15 applies.)

A Regular Guy

Friday, May fifth, was like every other workday at Ridgecrest Partners. Gerald Simmons, the Assistant Accountant, arrived promptly at 8:30, a good half hour before his boss, Charles Winsted, and left at 5:30 sharp. Susan Bannister, his secretary, depended on this, so that she could leave at 5:31.

Today, also as usual, Gerald carried the same briefcase he had used for years, both coming and going. Today, although no one knew it but Gerald, there was one key difference. Inside his briefcase was \$10,000 in cash—\$10,000 that had, until moments before, rested in the office safe.

The elevator operator who took Gerald down from his twelfth-floor office saw nothing amiss and joked, “Skipping out early, eh, Mr. Simmons?”

Gerald did not dignify this ridiculous remark with a reply, but Danny went on in a confidential whisper, “I took your boss down previous. He sure wasn't staying any longer than he had to. He's not a regular guy like you, eh, Mr. Simmons?”

Gerald smiled slightly but was silent for the rest of the short ride to the ground floor. He stepped out of the elevator and said, “Good night, Daniel.”

Gerald went outside and stood at the bus stop, glancing every now and then at his watch. For a moment, he thought he had missed his bus—it seemed to take longer tonight—but just then the Number 23 came around the corner and stopped.

As he dropped his token in the box, Gerald nodded to Miguel Garcia, the driver of the bus, and asked him how he was.

“Can't complain,” Miguel said.

“Not much point anyway, is there?” Gerald replied and made his way to the middle of the bus, near the exit. He saw Miguel give him a strange look and wondered if he'd been too friendly tonight.

He took his usual seat, opened his newspaper, and held it up in front of him. He kept the briefcase on his lap and was conscious of its weight on his legs.

The bus seemed to take longer to get to his stop, too, but at last he got off. He walked down Oak Street and turned left onto Appletree Lane, his street. The case was making his hand sweaty. He opened his gate and walked up the path leading to his neat brick house, then fumbled to put his key into the lock.

He put the briefcase down on the hall table and set about preparing a light supper—a two-egg cheese omelet and a salad. All the while he was eating it, he kept glancing through the kitchen door at the briefcase.

After supper he washed the dishes he'd used and went into the living room, where he watched the nightly business news. Then he turned off the TV and chose a book from the shelf to read before he went to sleep.

But just before he went upstairs to his bedroom, he did one last out-of-the-ordinary thing. He picked up the briefcase, went out the kitchen door and, without turning the outside light on, down the steps. He put the briefcase on top of the tool shed, behind some boards where it could not be seen except by someone who knew where to look. Then he went back inside and did not look back.

On Saturday morning, Gerald was awakened by banging on his front door. When he had thrown on his robe and opened the door, he was surprised to find not only two policeman, but Danny, the elevator operator, standing there. One policeman held up the briefcase.

“Is this yours, Mr. Simmons?”

“Why...” Gerald was at a loss. How had they found it? “Yes, it is. I must have left it...” He reached for the briefcase, but the policeman held on to it.

“Sorry, sir, it's evidence now.”

“I don't understand.”

“In a case of embezzlement,” the second policeman informed him. They both looked at Gerald expectantly.

“A—what? Embezzlement?”

Now Danny spoke up. “We're sorry, Mr. Simmons, but you must know that someone has been embezzling funds from Ridgecrest Partners for some time now.”

Gerald looked at Danny in astonishment, but not just because he sounded very different now from the barely literate elevator operator he'd been the day before.

“But I thought—”

“What did you think, Mr. Simmons?” Danny asked, and Gerald understood that his future depended on his answer.

“I thought he was being blackmailed.”

Danny smiled. It must have been the right answer. “Is that what Charles Winsted told you?”

“He said someone had seen him with a woman who wasn’t his wife and was threatening to tell Mrs. Winsted...” Gerald paused. So the money in the safe wasn’t Charles Winsted’s own. “How did you know...?”

“We were watching him to see how he got the money out of the building...”

“But how did you find out I had the money?” Gerald asked Danny, paying no attention now to the two policemen.

“It was the way you said good night,” Danny told him. “You never did before. You hardly knew I was there.”

Gerald felt his face go red, though his rudeness to Danny was the least of his worries right now. But Danny didn’t seem to mind.

“I went up to the office after I let you off,” he went on, “and found out from Susan Bannister that you *didn’t* say good night to her. Anyone else, that wouldn’t mean much, but you’re a man of regular habits, Mr. Simmons, and I knew right away that you were telling us something, even if you didn’t mean to give anything away.”

Gerald felt he had to explain. “He asked me to deliver the payment to the person—I didn’t know who it was—and threatened to accuse *me* of embezzlement if I—” Gerald’s thin shoulders slumped. “I can’t lose my job,” he said. “What would I do?”

“We understand that,” Danny said. “That’s why we’ve been patient, waiting for proof. I followed you home just to be sure what I suspected was right. I saw you put the briefcase on top of the shed. You were probably asleep at three a.m. when I saw your boss, Charles Winsted, take the briefcase off the shed and sneak away. He didn’t get far.”

“I see,” Gerald said. “Am I under arrest, then?”

The policemen smiled. Danny said, “We don’t want you in the same jail as Charles Winsted, Mr. Simmons. We need you alive and well—to testify against him.”

2010 MEETING DATES

Tuesday, April 27, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, May 25, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, June 22, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, July 27, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, August 24, 7:00 p.m.

Meetings are free to the public.

Unless otherwise noted, meetings are held every fourth Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m., at the James Joseph Dwyer Memorial Police Substation, 12700 Montgomery Blvd. NE, one block east of Tramway.

(If the substation lot is full, there is more parking available just below the substation, accessed via a driveway below the substation on the right.)

Check our Web site, www.croak-and-dagger.com, for schedule changes.

†Nooseletter Submissions†

Croak & Dagger friends are encouraged to contribute articles, reviews, and essays on aspects of mystery writing *and* reading for publication consideration. Information on relevant conferences or events is also welcome. Especially let us know if you have published a new book or story, or have an upcoming local author event. (Unbridled enthusiasm for your own mystery book is encouraged here.)

Length: Articles should average 500 words, but short items are also welcome.

Deadlines: Publication is every other month, starting in January. Submission deadlines are the 15th of the month prior to publication: Feb 15, April 15, June 15, Aug 15, Oct 15, and Dec 15.

The Living and the Dead: As a general policy, articles and information should focus on living authors rather than dead ones, but that's not set in concrete shoes. Articles about specific historical development of the crime-mystery writing genre, for example, would be welcome.

Submissions: Please submit via e-mail to newsette@earthlink.net, with "Nooseletter" in the subject line.

The *Nooseletter* is distributed to all members electronically. ♦ —Linda Triegel

Summary of Findings

The *Nooseletter* is the internal organ of the Croak & Dagger chapter, Albuquerque, of Sisters in Crime (SinC). Opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and editors. ♦

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