

Sisters
in
Crime †

SISTERS in CRIME
CROAK & DAGGER
ALBUQUERQUE CHAPTER



THE NOOSELETTER

Volume IV, Number 2—March 2008

†Expert Testimony†

From the Prez

By now, we're well into another exciting lineup of fascinating guest speakers at our monthly meetings, free books of your choice every month from our book exchange boxes, and interesting field trips later in the year.

Last month, I talked about opportunities for two mystery conferences being held in our "neighborhood" (Albuquerque and Denver) that you could attend in February and March. Also look in this issue for reports on the February C&D/SouthWest Writers and the March Left Coast Crime conferences. In the next issue, we'll be publishing a list of other conferences held across the country this year and early next that might interest you.

Please remember that our Nooseletter editor, Linda Triegel (newsette@earthlink.net), depends on motivated members like you to send her interesting contributions that make this publication one of the best among newsletters. Letters to the editor, book reviews, your own lists of Top Tens in any mystery-related field—"any interesting mystery-related item will be considered," according to Linda. Use the email addresses of *Nooseletter* authors to get in touch with them directly. And be sure to use the *Nooseletter* to look for like-minded readers who could meet to discuss favorite books and authors, or for like-minded writers to form a critique group that might help you get your work published.

That's what this chapter of Sisters in Crime is all about—getting the most useful information

to our members, whether they be readers or writers.

We will begin publishing articles encapsulating the remarks of speakers at our monthly meetings, in case you miss a meeting or two.

Likewise, we will try to interview speakers before they come to our meetings about what they will cover in their talks. Check out those stories and see if they don't snag your interest.

And we'll be publishing the minutes of each chapter board meeting, this year in February, April, June, August, October, and December.

In addition to all that, we have some fascinating speakers lined up for the next several months. Look for the list in this issue and see if you don't agree.

Mark your calendars and fasten your seat belts. We're in for a terrific ride. ♦

—Rob Kresge

Don't Miss It!

Tuesday, March 25, 7:00 p.m.

The guest speaker at our general meeting in March will be Pari Noskin Taichert, Albuquerque author of the Sasha Solomon mystery series, first president of the Croak & Dagger chapter, and columnist for the Mystery Writers of America monthly newsletter, *The 3rd Degree*.

She'll talk about her other current and future projects. Pari's road to publication has been as long, and rollercoaster-like, as that faced by other authors (and most of our speakers). Come hear her tell us how persistence and patience paid off. Pari also adores answering questions.

THE CASE OF MYSTERY, MAYHEM, AND MURDER

Holding the transparent plastic Personal Property Inventory bag before me, I reflected on the “Case of Mystery, Mayhem and Murder.” The scene of the crime was not a fancy hotel. Rather, my sisters and I headed to the hallowed halls of the University of New Mexico’s Continuing Education Building. The crowded parking lot provided the first evidence that many suspects awaited interrogation by my partner, sister Robert Kresge, and me.

After reporting in at the front table and receiving the usual sundry materials from the hands of the plain-clothed detectives sitting behind it, we separated. After stopping by the breakfast table filled with a mountain of bagels and assorted toppings, we attended the mandatory early-morning Captain’s orientation briefing in the main ballroom. Sister Robert, having the higher rank, received the assignment of interviewing the high-profile out-of-town guests. This rookie drew the low-profile interviews of the hard-working expert witnesses.

The first expert, retired Federal Agent Lucinda Schroeder, revealed the secrets of how to identify when someone is lying by using “structured questions.” Their language changes from specific first person to the general third person, from talking about specifics to discussing things in general, from emphatic denial to giving reasons why he or she would not do this.

Meanwhile in the adjoining room, Toni Plummer (associate editor at Thomas Dunne Books—St. Martin’s Press) spilled her guts on what editors are looking for. Sister Kresge’s extensive notes revealed her innermost secrets. Editors want Compelling Characters, Settings filled with Atmosphere and sensory details, a Plot, and a story that has Pacing and Development.

Dr. Jess Benson, Director of the New Mexico Poison and Drug Information Center, discussed the most interesting world of toxicology. When he gave his admonition on being careful of what you eat, I stared at the half-eaten bagel in my hand. The symptoms of poisoning given by the good doctor being absent, I warily consumed the bagel’s remains.

According to Kresge’s notes, Zoe Fishman of Lowenstein-Yost Associates discussed how to make the “Perfect Pitch.” Her secret is to visit the bookstores and read the jacket covers. She then went on to divulge what’s hot and what’s not in the current market.

After a delicious gourmet box lunch filled with epicurean delights, Phil Young provided his expert testimony on the murders and other mayhem that goes on every day in our national parks. As a retired US Park Services special agent, he ought to know!

Diane O’Connel, a New York book doctor, knows well what sells and what doesn’t. She kept no secrets from the eager listeners. Mastering the depths of “point of view” is sure to turn a decent but lackluster novel into a page-turner.

On my way to visit a man about a horse, I wagered a dollar at the raffle table. Hurrying back to listen to the final expert, Dr. Michelle Barry of the Office of the Medical Investigator, I viewed the graphic slides depicting real gunshot wounds with glee. The technical advice she offered about entrance/exit wounds, powder residue, and assorted tidbits of miscellaneous but useful information of the formerly living provided a wealth of knowledge to the assembled readers, writers, and writers-to-be.

Meanwhile, my partner in crime sat at the raffle table stroking the replica of the Maltese Falcon and listening from the door to Shirley Ray Redmond as she spoke about “How to hatch a mystery plot and make it chirp.” As the author of 17 books and over 450 magazine and newspaper articles, she can expertly attest to the fact that she can turn almost any idea into selling prose.

As the investigation wrapped up, I accepted a bribe (the coveted Maltese Falcon) not to reveal who done it. Together with my sisters, we celebrated the conclusion of our first conference by enjoying a tasty banquet at the MCM Elegante and listened to Susan Dunlap, founding member and past president of Sisters in Crime, discussing our history.♦

—Fred Aiken (*FAAiken@aol.com*)

LEFT COAST CRIME REPORT

About 700 people attended the annual Left Coast Crime conference for mystery readers and writers, held this year in Denver March 6-8. This conference is always held somewhere in the West in late winter. In 2005, it was hosted by El Paso; in 2006 it went overseas for the first time, to Bristol, England (on the left coast of Britain); and last February it was held in Seattle. LCC 2009 will be on the big island of Hawaii, Mar 7-12. Check that one out on www.lcc.org.

Readers can hear many of their favorite authors in panels and get to meet many more at signing events or over meals. Of special interest is that LCC, alone among the dozen or so mystery conferences every year, allows some non-published authors to speak as panelists as well.

LCC awards several prizes each year: The Lefty for most humorous mystery novel went to Elaine Viets for *Murder With Reservations*. Perennial favorite Margaret Coel's novel, *The Girl With Braided Hair*, won the Rocky award for best novel set in the LCC geographical area, and Rhys Bowen's *Her Royal Spyness* won the Dilys award from the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association.

Besides those authors, dozens of other prominent writers attended, including Donna Andrews*, Sandi Ault, Stephanie Barron (Francine Mathews), Steve Brewer, Jan Burke, JoAnna Carl, Jane Cleland, Reed Farrell Coleman, Vicki Delany, Denise Dietz, Parnell Hall, Lauren Haney, Carolyn Hart, Libby Fischer Hellmann, Robert Isleib, Craig Johnson, Joan Johnston, C.J. Lyons, Rick Mofina, Joanne Pence, Twist Phelan, Nancy Pickard, John Maddox Roberts*, Penny Warner, Betty Webb, and Guest of Honor Stephen White. C&D chapter members attending included Rob Kresge* and author members Penny Rudolph*, Lucinda Schroeder, Margaret Tessler*, and Pari Noskin Taichert*.

Panel topics included mystery sidekicks, thrillers, pacing and conflict, comedy, 21st-century private eyes, softboiled cozies vs edgy hardboiled mysteries, writing long series, historical mysteries, handling sex and violence, cross-genre mysteries, *CSI* and other forensic matters, the effects of Hollywood on mystery novels, character development, romance, short stories, noir, building the next generation of readers, and adventure crime. Special events included a surveillance workshop and practical exercise on the streets of Denver, machine gun familiarization, a Hawaiian costume contest (in honor of next year's venue), the Saturday night banquet, and a bus tour of Denver's most notorious murder scenes. ♦

*past speakers to the Croak & Dagger chapter

—Rob Kresge (rkresge777@comcast.net)

In Case We Overlooked It...



March's speaker will be Pari Noskin Taichert, award-winning journalist and two-time Agatha Award finalist for her Sasha Solomon series. Her newest book, *The Socorro Blast*, was published in January. She's currently writing the next Sasha mystery and also editing the debut novel in a new series featuring Darnda Jones, a psychic who works as a kind of "bug whisperer"—a pest controller—for the wealthy.

Fresh off local signings and national tours, Pari will discuss why she wrote *The Socorro Blast*—a book that is very dear to her heart—and how delving into more challenging themes has been received by her fans and the general public. *The Socorro Blast* reveals more about Sasha's family and continues to highlight the PR pro's efforts to help small New Mexico towns draw tourists, a continuing assignment she began in *The Clovis Incident* and continued in *The Belen Hitch*.

BLOODSPORT AT CROAK & DAGGER

Sisters in Crime Albuquerque Chapter founding members Carolyn Page and Ross Zarucchi traveled here from their home in Maine to speak at the February 26 Croak & Dagger program. Writing under the name Page Erwin, the writers have made their debut as mystery authors with publication of their book, *Bloodsport at Hiram Bog* (Hilliard & Harris).

The novel begins with a vivid description of a Maine winter day at Hiram Bog:

The battered, black, '83 Chevy pickup inched its way onto the edge of the ice and rolled slowly toward the middle of the bog. Earl Bagley tapped the brakes and came to a dead stop on what he hoped was thick ice. He rolled down the window and listened. No cracking.

The weather becomes a character in the story: A body is trapped under the ice at Thanksgiving and doesn't turn up until Earl, an ice fisherman, discovers it in January.

The tale provides readers with insights into how law enforcement operates in an environment where services are stretched thin and personnel are not normally called upon to solve murders. Maine is rife with real-life incidents of crime-fighting issues you will never see on *Law & Order*. Carolyn said in regard to the police procedures in the book, "We don't have to make anything up."

Carolyn Page and Ross Zarucchi began their joint endeavor as writers when they collaborated on their wedding announcement. Later, winning \$100 in a short story contest provided them with incentive to continue as a writing duo. They published the *Potato Eyes Literary Arts Journal* in Maine for twelve years. During that time they also ran Nightshade Press, which published eighty-five books of literary distinction, and they conducted an annual chapbook (literary pamphlet) competition.

After Carolyn inherited a collection of over 3,000 family letters, some from her great-grandfather, a physician who came to Las Vegas, NM, in the 1880s, the couple moved to New Mexico to conduct research and write a mystery. While living in the Southwest and writing about the Wild West, they also began their Maine mystery, *Bloodsport at Hiram Bog*.

Would the couple rather be writing historical nonfiction or literary fiction? They don't believe they have the academic credentials to write history, and literary fiction is a tough sell in today's marketplace. Ross's response is, "Write the book you *want* to write—and kill somebody."

Mystery fiction is commercial but can also be literary; read *Bloodsport* to see for yourself.

The sequel to *Bloodsport at Hiram Bog*, entitled *Bones of Contention*, is due for release in August 2008. Check out Page Erwin's website, www.pageerwin.com. ♦

Your Board

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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.

April's speaker will be Detective Jay L. Barnes who has been a police officer with the Albuquerque Police Department since 1993. Currently, he works on the Child Exploitation Detail, investigating hundreds of sexual predator cases of sexual predators who target children, online predators, and stranger abductions.

Detective Barnes will discuss the investigatory process as it relates to sexual predators and provide insight into some of the unusual cases he has been involved in.

Unless otherwise noted, programs are free and open to the public and are held in the police briefing room of the James Joseph Dwyer Memorial Substation, 12700 Montgomery NE, one block east of Tramway. (If the substation lot is full, additional parking is available just below the substation; the entrance to that lot is via a driveway below the substation on the right.)

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

The logo for Sisters in Crime, featuring the words "Sisters in Crime" in a stylized, handwritten font. The "S" in "Sisters" is large and prominent, and the "C" in "Crime" is also large and stylized.

Sisters in Crime was founded in 1986. *The purpose of Sisters in Crime shall be "to combat discrimination against women in they mystery field, educate publishers and the general public as to the inequities in the treatment of female authors, raise the level of awareness of their contribution to the field, and promote the professional advancement of women who write mysteries."*

The Cairn of Albertvs

Under Vesuvius by John Maddox Roberts, St. Martin's Press, 2007, 224 pages, \$23.95 (HC)

Veteran Romanophile and New Mexico writer John Maddox Roberts's new novel, *SPQR XI* is set in Baiae, a posh and decadent Roman resort town on the Bay of Naples (*Sub Vesuvio...*).. Metellus Decius Caecilius, appointed to a one-year term *as praetor peregrinus*, a circuit judge dispensing justice in local courts, brings along his family in hopes of a little Sun & Fun away from the suffocating atmosphere of Rome. Instead, he finds Sin and Frustration in a string of serial murders seemingly connected by the fragrance of an expensive perfume.

Rather than the plot synopsis of usual reviews, the Cairn would like to comment on how adroitly Roberts uses his Classical sources. For example, the date is made known by references to Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompey, both alive, and therefore the setting is before Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C.E.* On the last page we are told it is the year 704 of the City of Rome—49 B.C.E.—and which two consuls are in office. John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788, still in reprint!) lists information on all proper names in the Classics, including every consul up to 303 C.E.

Roberts writes in the first person: Caecilius describes things and makes verbal asides. Wealthy Romans chilled their wine, using ice sawn from frozen mountain lakes, insulating the blocks with straw and storing them in caves. Rather than a narrator telling us that, Caecilius asks his host, "Where do you get your ice?" Jérôme Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* gives a rich overview of the physical and moral background of a Roman citizen's day, and includes citations by ancient writers. These Greek and Roman authors are readily available in English; Penguin Classics alone lists over 100 works. Roberts uses them well.

The saying was that all roads led to Rome, but they also led out of the city, spreading

*B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are current designations for B.C. and A .D.

crime, bribery, political trade-offs (today's congressional earmarks), and a general disdain for aliens. Citizenship for everyone in the Empire was two centuries off, and slavery was the norm—upper-class lifestyles would have collapsed without slaves, a third of the population. Gaeto is a Numidian slave merchant, both a non-citizen and a provider of repugnant services. He is accepted because of his wealth, yet no citizen would attend his funeral. His son is accused of the first murder. In such subtle ways, Roberts introduces the moral dilemma of slavery and prejudice.

Greeks had colonized the area south of Naples—*Neapolis*, or “New Town”—and their influence still was strong. Jocasta, a former professional entertainer, is the Greek wife of Gaeto, and Diocles serves as priest of the temple of Apollo; both are shunned as resident aliens. The *praetor's* shrewd patrician wife, Julia, her tag-along friends, a talented freedman, and vulgar businessmen and their wives (the type you try to avoid at any current resort) round out well-drawn characters. Distant Vesuvius becomes a metaphor for passions seething beneath their skins. ♦

Valere... Be in good health!

—Albert Noyer (www.albertnoyer.com)

The War Against Miss Winter by Kathryn Miller Haines, HarperCollins, 2007, 317 pages, \$13.95 (TP)

It's rare for me to describe a murder mystery as “delightful,” but *The War Against Miss Winter* is just that. Ms Miller Haines's first novel opens in New York City on New Year's Eve, 1943. Its cast of characters would have been at home in a Damon Runyon story. They include:

Rosie Winter – Our protagonist and wannabe actress, trying to make it in Manhattan. She is relegated to a day job as Girl Friday at a one-man-and-a-secretary PI office while auditioning at cattle-calls and being offered casting couches. On page 5 she stumbles into remains of her boss dangling in the closet: “His

Key:

PB = Paperback

TP = Trade paperback

HC = Hardcover

her office on New Year's Day to find the skin was a deep bluish gray and hung from his bones as if the adhesive that had once joined them had begun to fail.” That's *good!*

Jayne – Rosie's roommate at the George Bernard Shaw House *aka* Home for Wayward Actresses, and her best friend. Jayne is a petite blonde whose thespian *bête noire* is “the voice of a two-year old.” Jayne is also a softie who's tough as nails, and the girlfriend of Tony B – erstwhile gangster, gentlemanly shepherd of nubile young actresses, with a heart of gold and enough muscle to keep things under control.

Ruby Priest – The *femme fatale* of the George Bernard Shaw House seems to find success consistently falling her way, and “rather than being gracious about it, she constantly rubbed her achievements in my face.” She's the one we love to hate.

And a unique and equally colorful supporting cast, including Churchill the cat.

The charm of *Miss Winter* is its unpretentiousness. It's a first-person account of the slightly off-plumb life of a third-tier actress in New York in the midst of World War II. When was the last time you read phrases like: “He took a gander at her gams...” or “He was bumped off, plain and simple”? Or verbs like “jawing,” “chinning” or “bumping gums”? There are enough McGuffins for the fastidious, enough corpses for the imaginative, and an overall sense of fun – if not necessarily for all the characters, then certainly for the reader. You get to know these people, and you like them.

Miller Haines not only has the language just right, but the attitudes of the characters within the context of the time, the place and the national temperament. According to her bio, the author is an actor, playwright, and artistic director of a theater company. That background is reflected in the theatrical structure of the book. A significant characteristic of successful theater is the limited opportunity for backstory. Theater is show, not tell. Character, setting, plot,

and context must receive equal billing to achieve a balance that keeps the story moving as the scenes and actors change. Miller Haines incorporates detail without letting it dominate. One particular subtlety that didn't penetrate my consciousness until about chapter 10 (of 36) is that each chapter title is the title of a play appropriate to the context.

I had one quibble: Not uncommon to the genre, Miller Haines tends toward a plethora of metaphor and simile. In many contexts they come across as intellectual exhibitionism. In *Miss Winter* they provide the opportunity to reinforce the smart-aleck character of the protagonist while maintaining consistency with the mood of the story. In another context it might seem strained. In *Miss Winter* it's part of the fun.

Good read! ♦

—Ira Rimson (*irimson02@comcast.net*)

The Suspect, by John Lescroart, Signet, 2008, 518 pages, \$9.99 (TP)

If you are an aficionado of legal mysteries, John Lescroart may surprise you as arguably in the same league as Grisham and Turow. His latest suspense thriller, *The Suspect*, centers on Gina Roake, an accomplished attorney who has never participated in a murder trial and who takes on the defense of Stuart Gorman, a nature writer who finds his brilliant physician wife drowned in their hot tub on returning from a weekend in the country. Stuart is something of a hothead, and though clearly completely innocent, repeatedly demonstrates that he is his own worst enemy. His habit of talking too frankly presents the DA with what appears to be a watertight case against him. One of Gina's primary tasks is to rein Stuart in to prevent him from talking himself expeditiously into prison.

Stuart's wife, Caryn, a leading orthopedic surgeon, had just discovered that the patented artificial hip designed by her, which was about to go into production through a medical start-up company, had a fatal flaw. If the venture succeeded, she and her associates would each make a fortune. However, she

wished to halt production until the problem was fixed, even though her investors and business associates were determined to press on as scheduled. Back at home, Stuart and Caryn had drifted apart over the years, and Stuart angrily flees to their country retreat when, on the Friday preceding the weekend of Caryn's murder, she announces that she is sick and tired of being married to him and wants a divorce.

It's the old choice between Love and Money as motive, and the author skillfully maintains the reader in a state of suspense about the outcome until the very last chapter. The suspense is heightened by the reader's knowledge from the outset that Stuart is innocent but that nevertheless there is a strong possibility that his trial will end in a guilty verdict. Fascinated horror that justice may grossly miscarry is offset by the hope, kept alive till the end, that Gina will somehow pull a rabbit out of the hat.

Lescroart's plain prose style is simple and clean, but deceptively designed not to distract from the development of a complex plot and the rich characterization of the main players. Stuart, whose love of Nature has a spiritual side, cannot see what is wrong with being open and blunt. Gina must overcome this as well as the disadvantages of having been out of the game for a couple of years, not to speak of the old boys network in the San Francisco DA's office and Homicide Squad, who are both salivating for the conviction of a spurned husband having murdered a celebrity wife.

This is the first book by John Lescroart that the reviewer has read. He looks forward to enjoying more from the 17 that have been previously published. ♦

—Jonathan Sacks (*jsacks@pobox.com*)

The Cloud Atlas by Liam Callanan, Bantam Dell, 2004, 591 pages, \$29.95 (HC)

Every now and then you come across a novel so beautifully written that its aura lingers long after you've finished reading. Liam Callanan's first novel, *The Cloud Atlas*, is bound to become something of a classic among

20th-century historical. Never mind that this book fits neatly into the “literary” genre; it’s also a page-turner mystery/suspense novel.

Much of the action takes place in relatively seamless flashbacks. The narrator, Louis Belk, now an elderly priest, was, during World War II, a bomb disposal expert whose mission was to find and disarm eerie Japanese firebombs brought stealthily across the Pacific by balloons. His work, of course, had to be covered up, kept secret from a populace that might panic at the notion of enemy weapons on their continent.

Alaska—its moods, its diverse peoples, its wildly beautiful scenery, shadowed part of the year by the darkness that brings on “arctic hysteria”—is as much a character as it is a setting for Callanan’s mesmerizing novel.

And the people, past and present, are as memorable as the setting. In the present there’s Ronnie, an aged, eccentric Yup’ik shaman whose health is failing. In the past, there is Louis’s commanding officer, Captain Gurley, as bizarre and obsessed as *Moby Dick’s* Ahab. There’s also Lily, the Russian-Eskimo fortuneteller, whose sometimes destructive mystique beguiles, distracts, and now and then dements the men who vie for her attention. And then there is the Japanese Saburo—hero or villain?

But where is the Cloud Atlas, a sort of grail in this tale, purported to hold the secrets?

Almost as much an experience as it is a good read, this book’s audience should include those who don’t believe a “literary” novel can be a fast-paced and oddly compelling mystery. ♦

—Penny Rudolph (penny3938@comcast.net)

ROB’S RANDOM SHOTS

March Case File Number One

The Spellman Files by Lisa Lutz, Simon & Schuster, 353 pp, \$25 (HC)

This is the first of two reviews in this issue that I hope will show readers how to review books they find to have intriguing premises, but ultimately are not their “cup of tea.” All of us

must read a few books like this each year and just because we don’t like them doesn’t mean someone else might not. Here goes.

Lisa Lutz, a screenwriter, has written an interesting novel that purports to be a mystery but is not. It reads a little like a caper, but Donald E. Westlake does not have to start looking over his shoulder.

The premise is that bright young Isabel “Izzy” Spellman comes from a line of cops and private eyes. Her parents are in the business, and she grew up on stakeouts and research, “digging up dirt.” She has a younger sister, Rae, and an older brother who’s a lawyer.

The parents want Izzy to one day take over the family business. Young Rae is supposed to be in school, but uses all her family training to dodge homework and defy school authorities. Izzy’s job, besides helping her parents, is to keep Rae on the straight and narrow.



Interesting idea. There’s even a mystery in here, a decade-old disappearance/possibly murder that Izzy once in a while remembers she should attempt to unravel. Add in recovering alcoholic Uncle Ray, a retired cop, and Izzy’s love interest, a dentist she meets at a health club, and you have a weaving, start-and-stop plot with plenty of subplot opportunities.

Told sometimes out of chronological order in Izzy’s journal entries and appointments with a shrink, the thread of the story often gets lost in too-cute Rae shenanigans, deception of parents, counter-surveillance, stakeouts, and other antics until ultimately, I didn’t care whether Izzy got her guy, solved her case, or achieved independence from her parents. At least it had a consistent viewpoint character (see the next review).

But none of that means *you* won’t like it. It’s lighthearted and shows a deft touch with dialogue and description. It’s cinematic and has been nominated for a couple of minor awards. Look for it in the March book box. I’m sure Lisa Lutz will be heard from again. ♦

March Case File Number Two

47 Rules of Highly Effective Bank Robbers by Troy Cook, Capital Crime Press, 282 pp, \$14.95 (TP).

Here's another highly cinematic mystery/thriller/comic caper novel by an accomplished screenwriter. It has also been highly successful, garnering quite a few award nominations. Must be a trend I've stumbled upon, perhaps its own sub-genre? (see Case File Number One above)

Troy Cook has more experience than Lisa Lutz, though, having worked on 80 films in various capacities. So his book, like hers, is highly cinematic, lighthearted, and not a mystery. Think Carl Hiassen criminals in the Southwest. However, unlike the Lutz novel, this one has multiple viewpoints. Let me stress that. *Multiple* viewpoints. I lost track after about twelve. Most, but not all chapters begin with one of Wyatt's rules of bank robbing, but we never see all 47 and many of them didn't engage me. And if Rob Kresge can't see the humor in something, friends, we must be in the final act of *Hamlet* or *Titus Andronicus* (look it up).

The premise is that 9-year-old Tara Evans' daddy, psychotic widower Wyatt, drags her along on a string of bank robberies. He does the planning, driving, and spending of loot, but he needs a cohort with a second gun. In the early chapters, the gun is unloaded and a masked Tara does her best not to cry and hold her weapon steady.

Cut to chapter two. Tara, now 22, is having second thoughts about a life of crime. She has done so well up to now that the authorities think the second bandit is a boy. No sooner do we get to see her evolving conscience than we get the first of many point-of-view shifts and daddy Wyatt begins to arbitrarily kill bank employees, guards, and customers. Suddenly the book is not so light-hearted any more.

Then we get the first of a parade of chapters and scenes from other viewpoints—Tara's love interest Max, Max's sheriff daddy, a second pair of down-on-their-luck criminals with a score to settle with Wyatt, various low-lives who assist the second pair, motel, gas station, and bank

clerks, even a dedicated black FBI agent and his incompetent boss. The rapid-fire changing of POV in scenes and short chapters allows Cook to move the action along like an action movie, showing us roadblocks being set up, traps laid, and discussions among pursuers. Very movielike. But we lose track of Tara and our sympathy for her plight is gradually diluted until she shoots customers in a robbery.

By the time we get to the confused and apparently happy ending Cook visualized, we've only had about six chapters from Tara's viewpoint out of 27. Sometimes the POV changes scene by scene, and there can be a half-dozen such changes in a single chapter. Not necessarily confusing, but discomfiting.

Cook has apparently penned another novel (not a sequel), *The One-Minute Assassin*, and I will have heard all about it at a panel at Left Coast Crime in Denver on March 9. I'm on that panel with him. See my report on that mystery conference elsewhere in this issue. ♦

—Rob Kresge (rkresge777@comcast.net)

So Many Mysteries, So Little Time

Nancy Pearl, the author of a book entitled *Book Lust*, believes that one should never finish a book one doesn't like, no matter how popular or well reviewed the book is. Pearl has developed **The Rule of Fifty**, which she explains in her book:

Believe me, nobody is going to get any points in heaven by slogging their way through a book they aren't enjoying but think they ought to read. I live by what I call "the rule of fifty," which acknowledges that time is short and the world of books is immense. If you're fifty years old or younger, give every book about fifty pages before you decide to commit yourself to reading it, or give it up. If you're over fifty, which is when time gets even shorter, subtract your age from 100. The result is the number of pages you should read before deciding.

—contributed by Sarah Schwartz

Kidnapped (an Irene Kelly Mystery) by Jan Burke, Simon & Shuster, 2007, \$7.99 (PB)

In the opening chapter of *Kidnapped*, we find someone murdered by a hit *woman* (a surprising departure from the “usual” hitman). While this is happening in one part of town, the victim’s child is being kidnapped in another. Shortly afterwards, another family member is framed for the murder. Since we know from the get-go whodunit,” this is rather a “*why* did it happen?” And “*how* will it be resolved?”

The mystery revolves around the family of a wealthy couple who had—over the course of many years—adopted a total of 21 children. Unfortunately, some of the children and their children aren’t as high-minded as their adoptive parents, and what seems on the surface to be a close-knit family more accurately resembles a cult. As their lives are exposed, the cult-like aspects become increasingly sinister.

Five years after the original kidnapping, newspaper reporter Irene Kelly enters the picture. Author Jan Burke has a gift for telling Irene’s story in the first person, at the same time showing Irene to be both compassionate and tough.

Irene knows that kidnapping is a federal offense, but in looking up background information for a news story on an old (unrelated) kidnapping, she learns that kidnapping “didn’t count in one of the leading reports on crime in the U.S. It was literally easier to get statistics on auto thefts than child abduction. I got curious. . . .”

Irene tracks down a study on missing children and is astounded at the number reported missing in one year alone. “If they had just been numbers, I suppose I would have gone on to something else. But they were children.”

After talking it over with her editor, Irene writes a story about abducted children and is swamped with phone calls as a result.

“Most were people were worn out by their hope. What would they have done with their energy, I wondered, if they hadn’t spent it looking for a missing child? The slight chance that I might be able to help them had led them to

take time out of whatever else they had planned that day to contact me.”

From this point on, the chapters alternate between Irene’s viewpoint and those of the other characters. There’s quite an assortment of personalities, each clearly defined. Burke weaves the assortment very skillfully, and I was completely engrossed in unraveling the mystery along with Irene. ♦

—Margaret Tessler (nm.mystery54@earthlink.net)

Death Song by Michael McGarrity, Dutton, 2008, 293 pages, \$24.95 (HC).

“These Irish writers sure can tell a story,” said my sister after I gave her a copy of Michael McGarrity’s *Tularosa* to read on her flight home. She was halfway through it before she even got to the Sunport.

In *Death Song*, McGarrity’s 11th Kevin Kerney mystery, he again tells a fast-paced, compelling story. I’d read the first in the Kerney series when I was still living in Pennsylvania and devoured the rest after I moved to New Mexico, and it seems to me that while *Death Wish* isn’t his best (maybe it was the hyped-up anticipation on my part), you’re still constantly wondering “what happens next” with these characters.

Two murders of people close to people close to Kerney set him off looking for a killer who left no clues other than that he seemed to know the victims. This faint trail leads eventually to a major drug-smuggling ring by way of other murders that Kerney races to solve before he’ll feel comfortable retiring from the police force to enjoy his ranch and family happily ever after.

McGarrity brings back some characters from previous books, including Kerney’s former secretary Helen Muiz, Deputy Romona Pino, and Kerney’s wife Sara, who’s home battling a case of PTSD after her tour in Iraq. Clayton Istee, McGarrity’s son by an Apache woman (whom he only recently learned about) plays a major role after the first murder (there are always more than one) takes place on his turf.

McGarrity has a clever, if maddening, way of letting you get to know and like characters before he kills them off, but I guess this makes you more interested in finding out whodunit. Personally, I usually forget who did it, which is why I've read several novels in the series more than once (and resurrected the dead to my satisfaction).

McGarrity is also expert at bringing a setting to life. This story takes place in Lincoln County, where Clayton works, in Albuquerque's University area and Four Hills, and around Santa Fe, mostly in a raging snowstorm that will have you reaching for your wooly socks and a sweater. McGarrity's bare-bones writing style has a cumulative effect, so compelling that you hope there will be yet another book in the series. Kerney isn't retired *yet*. Anyway, crime seems to find *him*. ♦

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

A BROTHER'S COMMENTARY

OK. I'm not a "Sister," but I've been a member of Croak & Dagger since its inception, so I suppose I'm an "honorary," if not totally honorable sister. It wasn't until I joined up that I'd ever heard of "cozies." I had read Agatha Christie as a kid, and Baroness Orczy, but their protagonists were male.

Miss Marple broke the sex line for me. Then there was Jessica Fletcher in *Murder She Wrote*, even though it's written by men. More recently, female protagonists have become plentiful: Kathy Reichs's Dr. Temperance Brennan and Kathy Brandt's Detective Hannah Sampson. Even Katherine Neville's Mireille de Rémy and Catherine Velis—although the former lived during the French Revolution. These are serious women characters, who do serious—even heroic—things.

When I started looking for books to review for *Nooseletter*, I looked specifically for those by female authors. Lately, I've come across what seems to be a new subset of the "cozy," in which female protagonists do dumb things. Really dumb. I reviewed *Jacob's Ladder* a few issues back and broached the subject. Recently,

I started a book that seemed promising, but quickly degenerated into, I suppose, the murder mystery equivalent of a bodice-ripper. In the first paragraph the female protagonist trips over a body while entering a client law firm's office with the makings for the next morning's breakfast. Here's how it went, page by page:

Page 1: She suspects it's a joke. There's a detailed description of food products spilled on the floor.

Page 2: She still thinks it's a joke; calls to the lawyers whose sense of humor she suspects runs to physical mayhem on ladies at 10:30 at night. Detailed description of the furniture.

Page 3. Is mostly a tabulation of past practical jokes by the firm's lawyers, until she discovers the body on the floor.

Page 4. After a half-page description of her relationship with the victim, including a description of its Calvin Klein suit (found at a second-hand store), she still thinks it's a joke.

Page 5. Starts by describing artwork of a peach pie. Protagonist yells at corpse to "Get Up" (emphasis in original), then tries to find pulse in wrist.

Page 6. Describes victim's hairdo, clothing, and educational background. Our heroine notes "redness around her neck" and "blood seeping out of a gash in her forehead. . . . Her slack mouth contrasted with her bright, curly hair." (*Sorry, that connection escapes me, unless there's something called unslack hair.*)

Page 7. She finally thinks "Don't touch anything" and "Get help," but can't find her cell phone (left it in her car). No dial tone on the office phones. So she starts CPR on the body. (*Helloooooo! Is there a real person in there?*)

It isn't until page 14 that she manages to find a phone and get the 911 operator. What am I missing?

Of course, this is the work of a published author, which I am not. Fourteen books, according to the credit page, as the "Master of the Culinary Whodunit." Obviously there are readers who get through the 400+ pages. Maybe the 11 recipes at the back of the book act as a kind of reward for reading it. I don't get it. But, then, I didn't get past page 14.

—Ira Rimson (*irimson02@comcast.net*)

She Says...

HIGHBROW MYSTERIES, ANYONE?

I read mostly mysteries, and frankly I haven't been that impressed with the offerings I've picked up recently. Last December I decided to read the best of the best—no mysteries for a while, but the *New York Times*' five "best" 2007 novels. They are:

- *Man Gone Done*, by Michael Thomas. "This first novel explores the fragmented personal histories behind four desperate days in a black writer's life."
- *Out Stealing Horses*, by Per Petterson. Translated by Anne Born. "In this short yet spacious Norwegian novel, an Oslo professional hopes to cure his loneliness with a plunge into solitude."
- *The Savage Detectives*, by Roberto Bolaño. Translated by Natasha Wimmer. "A craftily autobiographical novel about a band of literary guerrillas."
- *Then We Came to the End*, by Joshua Ferris. "Layoff notices fly in Ferris's acidly funny first novel, set in a white-collar office in the wake of the dot-com debacle."
- *Tree of Smoke*, by Denis Johnson. "The author . . . offers a soulful novel about the travails of a large cast of characters during the Vietnam War."¹

I wanted to love these novels. I hate to think of myself as some kind of anti-intellectual who has given up on great literature in favor of a more vulgar form of entertainment, mystery novels. My favorite author is John Updike, for crying out loud. I'm not a bad person!

I try to read no more than 50 pages of a book I don't enjoy, and I was able to adhere to

¹ Quotes are from www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/10-best-2007.html.

He Says...

HIGHBROW, ANYONE? A REBUTTAL

I once read histories and what used to be called literary fiction. I searched the *New York Times Book Review* for the latest in "great literature." I read a slew of fine books during those years: Pynchon, Updike, Irving, and too many others to mention here.

I only abandoned that track as the list of literary giants seemed to shrink. Also, as my work required heavier reading, I fled to mysteries for my leisure reading. My interest was quickened first by Dick Francis's gripping stories of jockeys, horses, and race tracks, and later by the slew of women detectives such as Patricia Cornwell's medical examiner and Sara Paretsky's tough V.I. Warshawski.

Like Sarah Schwartz, I was disappointed in the mysteries I read over the past year. I kept running into thin stories, trumpeted by respectable publishers. I also got tired as one series reached the S's, T's and U's, and the once fresh detectives became as tired as their authors. So I returned this year, briefly, to "great literature." I looked at the *New York Times* List of Best Books of 2007 and picked two. Unlike Ms. Schwartz, I was not disappointed.

Then We Came to the End is a funny, enjoyable read. And, yes, Ms. Schwartz, it has plot—characters, action, climax, and resolution. The characters are well drawn and amusing enough to have me at times laugh out loud. The action didn't have that mystery zip but it had inexorable movement toward doom in the demise of an ad agency that was laying off its writers and graphic artists. The story climaxed with a storm of explosive events that changed the lives of key employees and their boss. I followed the terminated to new employment and adventures—a satisfying resolution.

Tree of Smoke is indeed a grim story, entangled in the gruesome Vietnam War. The characters were often degrading and disgusting. But if you were someone caught, as I was as a young draftee at the end of the Korean War, you know how real and well drawn were these characters. The story has inexorable movement

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this principle with my first two attempts, *Man Gone Down* and *The Savage Detectives*. The latter has a definite Latin feel. It's set in Mexico, and it reminded me a little of the recent fine movie *Y Tu Mama También*. I'm a fan of Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Amado, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but *The Savage Detectives* just didn't go anywhere fast enough for me. *Man Gone Down*, similarly, didn't grab me.

I read *Then We Came to the End* to the end. It was funny all right, but I think if I hadn't worked in a "cubicle" atmosphere, I might not have kept reading. (Maybe, on the other hand, I would have thought it was funnier if it hadn't captured some of that atmosphere so well.) It was entertaining and well written, but what did it have that is missing in a mystery? It had what I would call *no plot*. Things *happened* in it, which isn't the same as having a plot. Did it have a deeper meaning I somehow missed? I didn't think I needed my allegorical and symbolic scuba gear for this one.

I listened to *Tree of Smoke* on CD all the way to the bitter end. I'm only guessing the people who think this novel is one of 2007's best see it as *Apocalypse Now* meets John le Carré, but I hated it. If I'm going to read about degradation and iniquity, I want it to have a good story arc that keeps me turning the pages (or packing discs into my CD player).

Out Stealing Horses is still on hold at the library.

I was mulling over my less than enthusiastic response to these "best books"—wondering if I have any business being a writer if I can't recognize good literature when I read it—when I came across an article by Charles McGrath entitled "Great Literature? Depends Whodunit," in the *New York Times*, Sunday, February 3. It seems the prestigious Whitbread Book Prize-winning American author Joan Brady, who lives in Totnes, England, next door to a shoe factory, won an out-of-court settlement for £115,000 after claiming the glue fumes from the factory caused nerve damage which, in turn, caused her to crank out a potboiler rather than the literary novel she wanted to write. As the *Times* of London put it in their headline, "Fumes Made

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as in *Then We Came to the End*. That title would have worked for this book as well. The climax came with the death of several of the leading characters. The resolution goes on.

What I had forgotten in my abandonment of literary fiction was how much I enjoyed the language. In both books many words and phrases were rich and caused me to pause, repeating and reflecting on certain passages. I remembered also that reading literary fiction can be hard work. I don't think a 50-page limit works well here. The reader needs to allow immersion in the story until it takes one over. I feel drawn to read more literary fiction. Interestingly, my interest in mysteries has also been reawakened in the past months by a group of Scandinavian mystery writers. I recently read two fine mysteries by Karin Fossum (Harcourt), *Indian Bride* and *The Devil Holds the Candle*. They are beautifully drawn, dark, melancholy novels, reminiscent of Ruth Rendell's work. Because of Fossum, Henning Mankell, and Arnaldur Indridason, writers who open up dark places in the mind, I believe we can look forward to some mysteries appearing on the *Times* best novel list in the future. Meanwhile, I will continue reaching for mysteries and literary fiction in anticipation of a good read.

—Bill Hershey (hersheyw@comcast.net)

She...

me Go Lowbrow, Says Writer." McGrath writes, "... what's behind the Brady controversy, of course, is the assumption that genre fiction—mysteries, thrillers, romances, horror stories—is a form of literary slumming. These kinds of books are easier to read, we tend to think, so they must be easier to write, and to the degree that they're entertaining, they can't possible be 'serious.'"

I look forward to the day when a mystery novel hits the *New York Times*' "The 10 Best Books" list.

What do you think? Write a rebuttal for the *Nooseletter* or in the Croak & Dagger Yahoo discussion list. Want to get on the Yahoo list? E-mail schwartzse@comcast.net.

2008 MEETING DATES

Tuesday, February 26, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, March 25, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, April 22, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, May 27, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, June 24, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, July 22, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, August 26, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, September 23, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, October 28, 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, November 25, 7:00 p.m.
December TBA

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.

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

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. ♦

†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 filler items are particularly welcome.

Deadlines: Publication is every other month, starting in January. Submission deadlines are the last day of the month prior to publication, that is: February 28, April 30, June 30, August 31, October 31, and December 31.

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, Editor



Still not a member of Sisters in Crime?

\$20/year brings mystery to your life! The Albuquerque **Croak & Dagger** chapter welcomes mystery fans who want to enjoy felonious fun, absolutely criminal companionship, and sensational speakers.

Benefits of membership in the **Croak & Dagger** chapter include a subscription to our *Nooseletter*, close contact with local mystery writers, and fun events with other mystery fans.

You do *not* have to be a member of the national organization to join us. Come hear our next program speaker and meet the gang. We promise to bring mayhem and murder into your life.

Contact our membership chair, at contact@croak-and-dagger.com.

Summary of The Board Meeting Minutes of Sisters in Crime Croak & Dagger Chapter, ABQ, NM, 5 Feb 2008

The meeting was called to order at 7 PM at the home of Rob Kresge
Board members present: President Rob Kresge, Vice President Penny Rudolph, Secretary/Treasurer Cheri Stow, Membership Jonathan Sacks, Website Technical Support Manager Sarah Schwartz, and Nooseletter Editor Linda Triegel

Old News:

Reminder: Feb 16: The conference will be held at the UNM Continuing Ed. Building on University Ave. For more info on the conference, check out the SWW website.

New News:

President's Report: Rob said our last speaker, Joe Badal, was great and "right on." He reminded us of the Left Coast Crime Conference coming up March 6-8, in Denver. Rob will ask at the meeting if anyone wants to carpool with him.

There may be upcoming tours: The main police station for the homicide & evidence room, crime lab, another visit to the morgue, and a Mystery Dinner.

Rob announced Future Speakers:

Feb: Page Erwin, Author

Mar: Pari Noskin Taichert, Author

April: Det. Jay Barnes, Sex Predator Squad

May: Jocelyn Campbell, PI

June 24: Michael McGarrity, Author

July 22: Tony Hillerman, Author (alternate: Anne Hillerman)

It was suggested that we have a panel of authors as a presentation instead of only one author.

Another suggestion was to move the monthly meetings to Titlewave Books at Eubank and Constitution possibly for next year, or another sub station more central. But there was no decision made at this time.

Sec/Treas Report: Cheri says she is very glad to be back from WA. She is looking forward to being more involved with Sisters in Crime this year. The financial report shows a balance of \$1,641.39.

Membership: Jonathan was happy to see two new members join with no dropouts. Announcements for membership reminders will go out about ten days prior to the meeting each month.

Editor: Linda asks that Nooseletter submissions be sent ASAP for the next issue. Volunteers will be recruited at the next meeting for "taking notes" on our speakers in order to do a write-up in the Nooseletter afterwards. It was decided that a board member will interview each speaker prior to the meetings and do a write-up on the upcoming speakers. The Toronto chapter suggests having an article exchange with Croak & Dagger.

Website: Sarah suggested we use PayPal, but no decision was made on this matter. Since Sara puts the newsletter on the web, she asks anyone who has ideas for the website to please contact her.

Future News:

April & Nov, Rob will need another board member to fill in for him. It was decided to hold the board meetings at each of the board member's homes in turn. The next meeting will be April 1 at Linda's apartment.

Submitted by: Cheri Stow, Secretary/Treasurer