

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

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UNDERDOGS OF SUSPENSE

Stories that make us
root for the little guy

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**Author Q&As: Dean Koontz, Paul
Tremblay, James Rollins & Nita Prose**

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Short Fiction: "Family First"

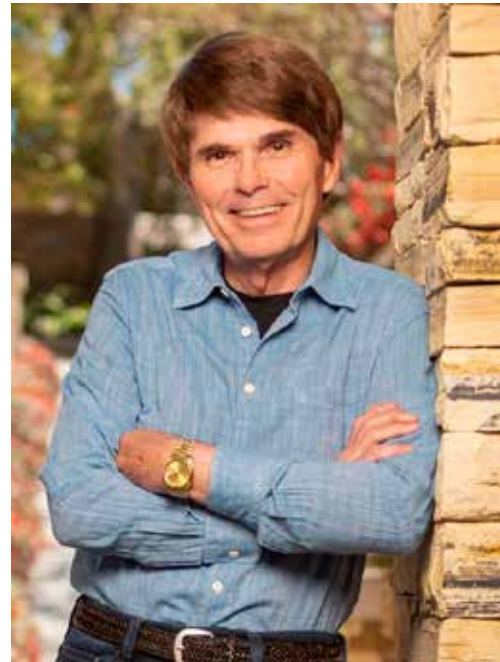
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**Feature: When a Place
Becomes a Character**

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**Reviews: *Silver Nitrate*, *The
Senator's Wife*, and more**

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

Get inside the brains of readers in this issue, from how they judge characters to what fascinates them about cold-blooded tales.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

As the tones of autumn leaves herald the approach of another crisp fall, there's an unmistakable chill in the air. Not just from the shift in the season, but from the heart-pounding, spine-tingling tales that await you in this fall edition of our magazine.

In our Features section, "A Real-Life Trial Jury for Fiction" studies how readers, like those on a trial jury, make subconscious impressions about characters based on hints from the author. Ever wondered what fuels our enduring fascination with detective yarns and tales of cold-blooded crimes? "Why Murder Mysteries Intrigue" will dive deep into the psychology behind our shared obsession. Explore "When a Place Becomes a Character" to discover how the environment can shift from mere backdrop to leading role. For those seeking something off the beaten path, "Underdogs of Suspense" shines a spotlight on the little guys.

Our Interviews section is equally riveting. Join us in candid conversations with one of the masters of suspense, Dean Koontz; the unsettling brilliance of Paul Tremblay; the adventurous sagas of James Rollins; and the gripping narratives spun by Nita Prose.

Last but by no means least, our featured short story, "Family First," will transport you to a serene fishing camp on Lake Superior. But don't be fooled by the calm waters; beneath the surface lurk familial ties, Mafia intrigue, and a sequence of disappearances that might just keep you up at night.

Happy reading,
Sam

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Editor-in-Chief
Sam Boush

Production Editor
Tehra Peace

Writers
Cara DiCostanzo
Charlene Bell Dietz
Pam Guynn
Sandra Hoover
Lou Jacobs

Robert McCaw
James Polkinghorn
Barbara Saffer
Carolyn Scott

Submit features, author interviews, reviews, and short fiction to sam@mysteryandsuspense.com.

Readers: A Real-Life Trial Jury for Fiction

The same strategy that works for trial lawyers, surprisingly, can also work for mystery writers.

BY JAMES POLKINGHORN

When we think back on our favorite novels in just about any genre, what is it that first comes to mind? Usually, regardless of the complexity or ingenuity of the plot, the first thing that stirs in our memory is our attachment to the protagonist as he or she navigated whatever course the author set for him or her.

Sometimes, on the other hand, we're connected by a shared revulsion for the nemesis introduced in the early pages. Books that didn't capture us featured lead characters with whom we couldn't (or didn't) connect viscerally, in either a positive or negative way.

Trial lawyers, of which I am one, are very aware of the notion of primacy. Jurors brought together to decide important issues in a group setting with complete strangers naturally seek things to hold onto as the information of the trial begins to flow. Their task is made more difficult by the prohibition they received from the judge at the outset denying them the opportunity to share their impressions with—or seek support from—their fellow jurors until the presentation of evidence is concluded, which is often a period of days or weeks. How do they do it? What happens?

They form subconscious impressions, that's what. We know that jurors are watching us carefully at all times when we're in their presence, not just when we're examining witnesses or making arguments. They notice how we interact with the courtroom personnel. They notice our appearance. They notice our voices and our changes of tone.

They see our nervous tics or other expressions of anxiety. All of the jurors do these things individually as we get ready to make our presentations, beginning in the jury selection process and ending with closing arguments.

AN EMOTIONAL PLAY

So when a lawyer gets up to make an opening statement—the single most important event in the trial—when she tells the jurors what the evidence will show, she has clear goals in mind if she has been well trained. She intends to establish some rapport with each juror individually, through eye contact and body language. And she intends to tell a story that conveys her sincere belief in her client's cause using language that is impactful at an emotional level. She wants the jurors to feel her as much as hear her, to connect with the words she weaves in their guts as much as their brains. She wants the jurors to trust her, personally. When all of this is done effectively, the jurors form deep attachments, both to the lawyer and to her story, they will not easily give up. They will hear everything that follows in the trial through the filter formed in those first minutes and, experience shows, they are often unshakable.

What does this mean for writers and readers of fiction? Capable authors know, sometimes through hard experience, that it's critical to introduce lead characters early and to introduce them in a way that induces a gut-level reaction in the reader that compels the reader forward, anxious to get to know this person better and learn how he or she will solve the mystery, crime, or other problem soon to be revealed. As

Top Survival Thrillers

readers, we may not be aware of this subtle manipulation of our emotions, but knowing of this does nothing to diminish our enjoyment of a book because the connection is subconscious and independent of our rational thinking.

Take Ernest Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, as an example. We are introduced to Jake Barnes, a WWI veteran living in Paris during the mid-1920s, as he describes another man, Robert Cohn, an acquaintance he knows socially. "Robert" and "Cohn" are actually the first two words of the novel. We get to know about Jake by the qualities he describes in Robert, the things that make an impression on him. This very clever and indirect introduction carries forward through social interplay during which Robert asks Jake about a woman, Brett Ashley. We learn a little more about Jake as he responds to Robert's questions before, eventually, we find ourselves sitting in a taxi with Brett and Jake as the nature of their relationship is revealed, creating a response that carries us the rest of the way as the lives of these two unfold before us.

Another good, and more recent, example is Nelson DeMille's classic, *The Gold Coast*. There we are introduced to John Sutter, an attorney and resident of an ancestral estate on the Gold Coast of Long Island, as he meets his new neighbor at a local nursery. His new neighbor is Frank Bellarosa, a notorious mafia don. The banal interaction that follows gives us immediate insight into John's way of thinking (and his omnipresent sense of humor). There follows an introduction to John's wife, Susan, including an outdoor sexual escapade, that gives us a real sense of foreboding, as we think of it, about how the interaction of these three characters will play out. We find ourselves turning pages quickly to reach their next encounters, all in service to a plot that is not so much complex as engrossing. It's the characters we're interested in rather than the specifics of the story structure.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

John Sandford's Lucas Davenport novels provide a twist on the device. He typically introduces us to the murderer first, allowing us to inhabit the person's mind as his motivations, character, and actions are revealed. We react viscerally, and subconsciously tether to the belief that this person must be stopped. At which point, Lucas Davenport is introduced, a dangerous and brilliant man fully capable of doing the stopping. The question remains as to how exactly this will happen, but our primary interest is in the ultimate interaction between these two.

A good example is *Extreme Prey*, where we first meet Marlys Purdy, a political zealot, as she dispassionately and brutally kills and butchers one of the rabbits she raises on her property. The details of the killing stick with us as we learn more about her thoughts and plans, knowing that once again Lucas Davenport will somehow set things right. The key, of course, is that we already have a fixed sense of what must happen: the path to its happening is of lesser importance.

In all three of these novels, and in most of the novels you fondly remember, the same basic process unfolds. A primary player is introduced through action revealing traits of character that attract or repel us, a bond is viscerally formed, and we move forward anxiously awaiting whatever is in store. Knowing that authors understand this process does nothing to undermine our enjoyment of their work, although it is sometimes fun to go back and see exactly how it happened.



About the author

James Polkinghorn is a lawyer and partner in a national law firm specializing in labor and employment law. He has extensive trial and litigation experience in multiple jurisdictions throughout the country. A Pittsburgh native, Polkinghorn moved with his family to Florida in high school, where he has since stayed. He has a degree in political science and a law degree from the University of Florida. He now lives in Key West with his wife, Becki, and their dog, Major Tom. *Liquid Shades of Blue* is his first novel. Visit jamespolkinghorn.com.

Pulsating heartbeats, rapid breaths, and gripping suspense all align perfectly to sketch the exquisite landscape of survival thrillers. It's a curious world, where humans battle adversities with the sheer will to live, a genre where the primal instinct of survival turns ordinary individuals into extraordinary heroes. But why, one might ask, do these tales of survival ignite such a spark in the human heart?

Survival thrillers stroke the most innate of human instincts—self-preservation. They offer a window to the extremes, places where life dances on the brink, yet hope lingers. Characters are pushed to their mental and physical limits, yet they persist. That resilience fuels inspiration, transforming these stories into anthems of human endurance and willpower. Yet, they also serve as a stark mirror, reflecting what one could become when stripped down to the essence of being human. The thrill is not in the danger, but in overcoming it.

Delving into this universe, five survival thrillers have left an indelible mark, their stories echoing across screens and pages alike. Each one is a unique canvas painted with grit, perseverance, and the ever-present question: how far can one go to survive?

An immediate standout is Stephen King's epic novel, *The Stand*. It's a saga that plunges the world into chaos,

unleashing an apocalyptic flu that leaves only a handful of survivors. These characters navigate the desolate wasteland, their plight fueled by a burning desire to live. The suspense lies in the survivors' struggle and their battle against an enigmatic antagonist. King's imaginative storytelling, tinged with stark realism, engulfs every reader.

Then, there is Alfred Hitchcock's classic film, *Lifeboat*. A survival thriller set in the unforgiving Atlantic waters during World War II, it chronicles the story of nine survivors of a ship sunk by a German U-boat, now crammed into a single lifeboat. As resources dwindle, they grapple with their circumstances, making uneasy alliances while suspicion and paranoia creep in. Hitchcock's masterstroke lies in the claustrophobic setting, the vast sea an uncaring observer to the unraveling human drama.

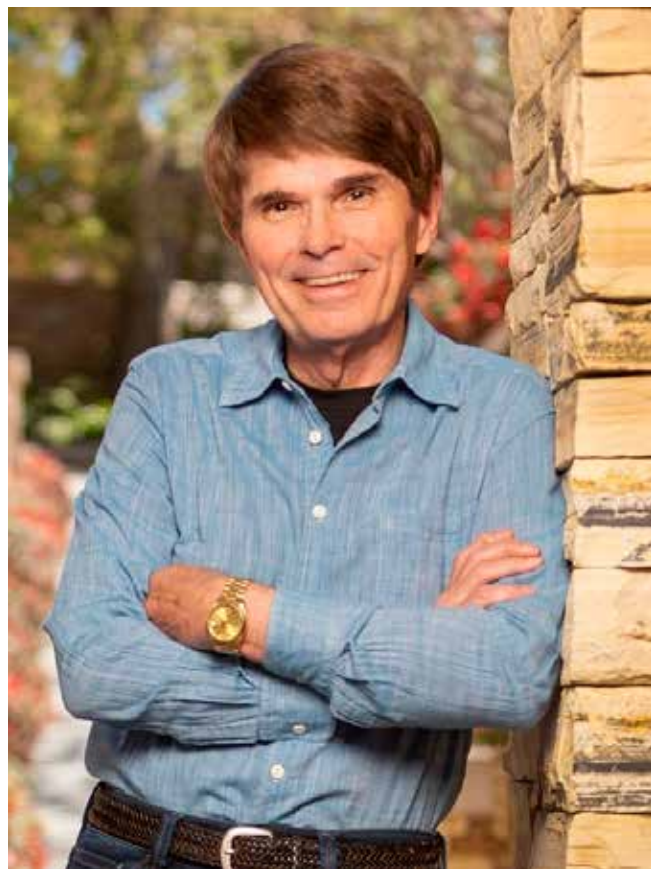
Next, the pages of Andy Weir's *The Martian* present an interplanetary struggle for survival. Weir pens the trials of an astronaut, Mark Watney, abandoned on Mars after his team mistakenly believes him dead. A hostile planet becomes the stage for a man's fight for life, armed with only his ingenuity and unyielding spirit. A riveting blend of hard science fiction and survival narrative, this novel invokes a sense of awe, projecting the indomitable human spirit against a backdrop of desolate Martian landscapes.

In the realm of visual narratives, Danny Boyle's film *127 Hours* brings to life the extraordinary survival story of Aron Ralston. Trapped in a Utah canyon with his arm pinned under a boulder, Ralston's desperate bid for freedom forms the heart of this thriller. Boyle's arresting portrayal of human endurance, coupled with James Franco's stellar performance, makes *127 Hours* a testament to the lengths a person can go when survival is at stake.

Lastly, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel must not go unmentioned. It tells the incredible tale of Pi Patel, a young Indian boy adrift in the Pacific Ocean, sharing a lifeboat with a Bengal Tiger named Richard Parker. As Pi fights for survival, the line between reality and illusion blurs, giving way to an intriguing allegory of faith and survival. The captivating narrative, coupled with Martel's lyrical prose, makes it a mesmerizing journey of survival.

While it's clear that survival thrillers tantalize the senses with danger and fear, the real magnetism lies in the undying will to live, the struggle against the odds, and the ultimate triumph of human spirit. For this reason, survival thrillers continue to captivate, the genre evolving into a mirror reflecting the most raw and compelling facets of the human experience.





Dean Koontz
New York Times bestselling author
deankoontz.com

Dean Koontz

Fourteen of Dean Koontz's novels have risen to #1 on the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list, making him one of only a dozen writers ever to have achieved that milestone. Sixteen of his books have risen to the #1 position in paperback. He lives in Southern California with his wife, Gerda, their golden retriever, Elsa, and the enduring spirit of their goldens, Trixie and Anna.

Q. *After Death* introduces a unique concept where the protagonist, Michael Mace, gains extraordinary abilities after dying. What inspired you to explore this idea?

Dean: I wish I had a simple, colorful answer. Like I encountered a yellow-eyed hunchback on a bridge at midnight, and he handed me an envelope containing a plot outline and threatened to drag me to Hell if I didn't develop it into a good novel. The answer is more mundane.

I'd read several novels about the Singularity, which means somewhat different things to different people, but which in essence is a belief that humanity will eventually merge with machine-computer technology and become fantastically smarter and immortal. Yeah, right. I've lived long enough to recognize a Utopian fever dream when I see one, and though I am not very wise about some things (okay, most things), I am wise enough to know that human nature ensures that utopian visions can never be fulfilled and in fact that those who pursue them can cause calamitous damage.

Because everything I was reading celebrated this Singularity evolution, I wanted to write something that took a different approach, as I'm basically a contrarian. Yet I didn't want to write a dystopian novel on the subject because the culture is drowning in dystopian novels, movies, TV series, cereal commercials. I wanted a novel that followed a more realistic and hopeful path.

Therefore ... what if the protagonist, who is involved in research into transhumanism, is one of fifty-five people who died when something in their experiment went badly wrong, and what if he is the only one to come back to life, and what if he is an embodiment of the Singularity. But he's not immortal and he's neither a superhero nor a supervillain, which frees him from the need to wear tights and a cape or a black Nehru jacket. What if he has one extraordinary ability and only one that gives him an edge, a hope of staying alive when the whole world is after him.

At that point, if the big-brain author can't come up with some ability that is interesting, logical, convincing, and fresh—he or she needs to get a real job in shoe sales or opt for a life of crime to pay the bills. When I realized what power Michael Mace is given, something obvious yet unlike anything I'd read before, I knew it would be fun to follow him and see how he put it to use.

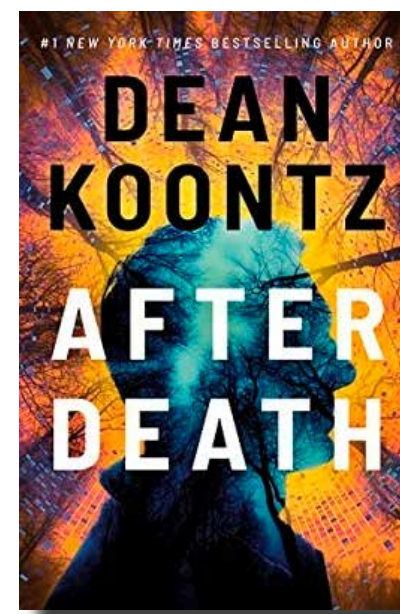
Q. Can you talk about the relationship between Michael and his best friend Shelby? How does Shelby's admiration for Nina and John influence Michael's actions?

Dean: This is not a spoiler: Shelby is one of the other fifty-four who dies in the lab incident and didn't come back to life. Shelby was attracted to Nina, a single mother with a son named John, but never expressed his interest. I don't write novels in which an agent of some intelligence service runs around saving the world. Whether or not a story has a fantastical element, I'm more interested in writing stories that are about more personal and compelling issues.

Michael's grief over the loss of Shelby motivates him to do something special for Nina—whereupon he discovers that she lives under a terrible threat from the gangbanger who is John's father. Suddenly he finds himself trying to rescue mother and son from an L.A. street gang as vicious and relentless as the Crips or the Bloods.

Q. *After Death* has a strong focus on the theme of rebirth and second chances. How did you approach the theme throughout the novel?

Dean: At the front of the novel is a quote from Paul of Tarsus: "Stand fast therefore in liberty ... and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Except for Michael, who has been liberated by death and rebirth, every character in the novel is in bondage to someone or some idea, in bondage to their dreams of power or to fear. Even the primary antagonist is in bondage to the psychopathic worldview that arises from his strange childhood, and therefore even though he's evil and terrifying, we can also understand him. Breaking free of what keeps us in bondage, taking advantage of second chances, is at the center of the novel.



Dean Koontz's latest: *After Death*

Michael Mace, head of security at a top-secret research facility, opens his eyes in a makeshift morgue twenty-four hours following an event in which every-one perished—including him and his best friend, Shelby Shrewsberry.

Having awakened with an extraordinary ability unlike anything he—or anyone else—has ever imagined, Michael is capable of being as elusive as a ghost. He sets out to honor his late friend by helping Nina Dozier and her son, John, whom Shelby greatly admired. Although what Michael does for Nina is life changing, his actions also evoke the wrath of John's father, a member of one of the most violent street gangs in Los Angeles.

But an even greater threat is descending: the Internal Security Agency's most vicious assassin, Durand Calaphas. Calaphas will stop at nothing to get his man. If Michael dies twice, he will not live a third time.

From the tarnished glamour of Beverly Hills to the streets of South Central to a walled estate in Rancho Santa Fe, only Michael can protect Nina and John—and ensure that light survives in a rapidly darkening world.

Q. What was your inspiration behind creating the character of Durand Calaphas, the assassin from the Internal Security Agency?

Dean: The aforementioned gangbangers are as dangerous as anyone but also unaware that they're also absurd and therefore funny. I felt I also needed an antagonist who was flat-out terrifying and unrelenting. Hence Calaphas. All psychopaths are power driven, with similar goals, but in the ideation of their madness, each is unique. Happily, Calaphas evolved to be so unique that he'll scare the bejesus out of some readers. (The author now high-fives himself, which is no easy feat.)

Q. How do you build and sustain tension in your storytelling?

Dean: Diligently, assiduously, relentlessly, determinedly. Tension, suspense, narrative momentum—whatever you want to call it—is as essential to successful fiction as are strong characters. I am always afraid of losing the reader's interest, and the best way to insure against that is to keep events, engaging character details, and surprises cascading on every page. In a sense, I write every novel as if a sinister yellow-eyed hunchback, once met on a bridge at midnight, will deal with me if I get boring.

Q. Can you share a bit about your current or upcoming projects? What can your fans look forward to?

Dean: Coming in January 2024 is *The Bad Weather Friend*, a suspense novel that is also a comic novel. I had such a great time with it that I wondered if I had gone off-road into a deep woods where no one would follow me. But my agents and then everyone else in my professional life responded so strongly and positively that I decided I wasn't insane after all. In July of next year, there's *The Huntress*, which was one of the hardest things I ever tried to pull off, and therefore one of the most fascinating. Taking a risk of falling on your face makes all of this worth doing. Anyway, given the face I have, falling on it would not be a tragedy.

A photograph of a dining table with a red tablecloth. In the foreground, a white plate holds a large knife with a black handle, partially wrapped in a white paper napkin. To the right of the plate is a silver spoon and a fork. A wine glass filled with red wine stands to the right of the plate. In the background, a glass of beer with a lemon slice is visible. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

Why Murder Mysteries Intrigue

Most of us would never kill someone.

That doesn't stop us from being

fascinated by those who do.

BY CHARLENE BELL DIETZ

For some reason, we're all drawn to what we don't understand. The need to investigate and comprehend must originate from some primeval-survival instinct. We navigate our daily world with little concern when it mostly consists of routine habits and familiar surroundings. Still, we more often than not delight in a chance to engage in something unknown if we can remain safe from emotional or bodily harm. Welcome to the mystery novel. Stories of suspense and crime have become the passport for us to experience menace without danger.

"Most of us would not kill someone, and, could not even imagine doing so, but we are still nonetheless fascinated by those who can," states the Police Science Academy web page. Forensic psychologist Dr. Paul G. Mattiuzzi, talking about crime and murder, says, "...it's a most fundamental taboo and also, perhaps, a most fundamental human impulse."

"Whenever a bizarre, horrifying, or seemingly out-of-character crime occurs, the human mind is baffled and wants to make sense out of something that seems senseless. Who is the perpetrator? What drove him to commit the crime? Why that particular crime? And so forth," suggests Stanton E. Samenow Ph.D., "Inside the Criminal Mind," *Psychology Today*, July 2020. So, it appears mystery readers search for more than thrills from this genre.

DRAWN TO THE PUZZLE

Samenow believes many readers, fascinated by gruesome details and events surrounding the crime, not only have a strong desire to solve the mystery but want to puzzle out what caused the perpetrator to commit such antisocial acts. We want to understand what's happening because there seems to be an innate need for us to acquire knowledge. Mystery novels show us what happens beyond the edge of rational society, events we would never want to personally experience. Perhaps knowing what goes on in these criminal minds also gives comfort to the reader that the perpetrator's thoughts radically differ from their own.

In the Whitechapel district of London, England, in 1889, Jack the Ripper captured everyone's attention for the series of women he mutilated and murdered. This historic awakening of serial killers happened more than a hundred years before the release of the American novel and movie, *Silence of the Lambs*, portraying Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter, serial cannibal killer. The success of Thomas Harris's imaginative writing garnered him five major academy awards and best seller status.

Then there's the nice-looking young man named Theodore Bundy. "Bundy, who had been convicted and sentenced to death in Florida in 1979, quickly became the poster boy for serial murder, not only because of the number

and severity of his crimes (he confessed to thirty murders but was suspected of killing more than one hundred women in several states over a number of years) but also because, on the surface, he seemed to personify the American ideal: he was handsome, charming, educated, and even had political aspirations. The disconnect between appearance and reality came to be seen as a defining trait of serial killers and is one of the main reasons Americans find them so fascinating,” said David Schmid, University of Buffalo, September 2018.

However, other 1980 serial killers, such as Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy, didn't hold the charm and appeal of Bundy. Both these killers preyed on men and cannibalized them.

A CELEBRITY OF SORTS

Crime blogger Erin McCarthy wrote, “Serial killers tantalize people much like traffic accidents, train wrecks, or natural disasters.”

Scott Bonn, professor of criminology at Drew University and author of *Why We Love Serial Killers*, wrote at *TIME*, “The public's fascination with them can be seen as a specific manifestation of its more general fixation on violence and calamity. In other words, the actions of a serial killer may be horrible to behold but much of the public simply cannot look away due to the spectacle.”

“In a culture defined by an understanding of celebrity that emphasizes visibility rather than meritocracy as the precondition for fame, serial killers like Bundy, Lecter, and [television series] Dexter have become the biggest stars of

all, instantly recognized by the vast majority of Americans,” said Schmid. “Our fascination with serial murder provides us with a funhouse mirror through which we can glimpse distorted but still accurate reflections of our fears, dreams, and values.”

Yet there's an interesting phenomenon when the readers or audience end up cheering for the bad guys. This applauding of criminal characters in stories usually don't involve killings, such as *Ocean's 11*, *The Italian Job*, and H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*. Instead of murder, these tales consist of theft from those who deserve it. According to the Police Science Academy, we cheer these criminals on because of our own innate need to see justice served.

SAFE THRILLS

Mystery and suspense novels attract readers for numerous reasons: we're curious and want to know how and why bad things happen. Learning about the criminal mind adds to our understanding, and this knowledge might be protective in some way. Through mysteries, we can safely experience thrills and see events we would never want to in real life. Following clues, we may solve the mystery and can have a fleeting moment of feeling powerful in our own living room. We crave for the return of fairness and justice. Finally, we know if the author is adept in mystery writing, we'll have an opportunity to feel intelligent when we guess where the twists and turns of a plot takes us.

Do you know of anyone who could commit a murder? Let me ask, “Could you?”



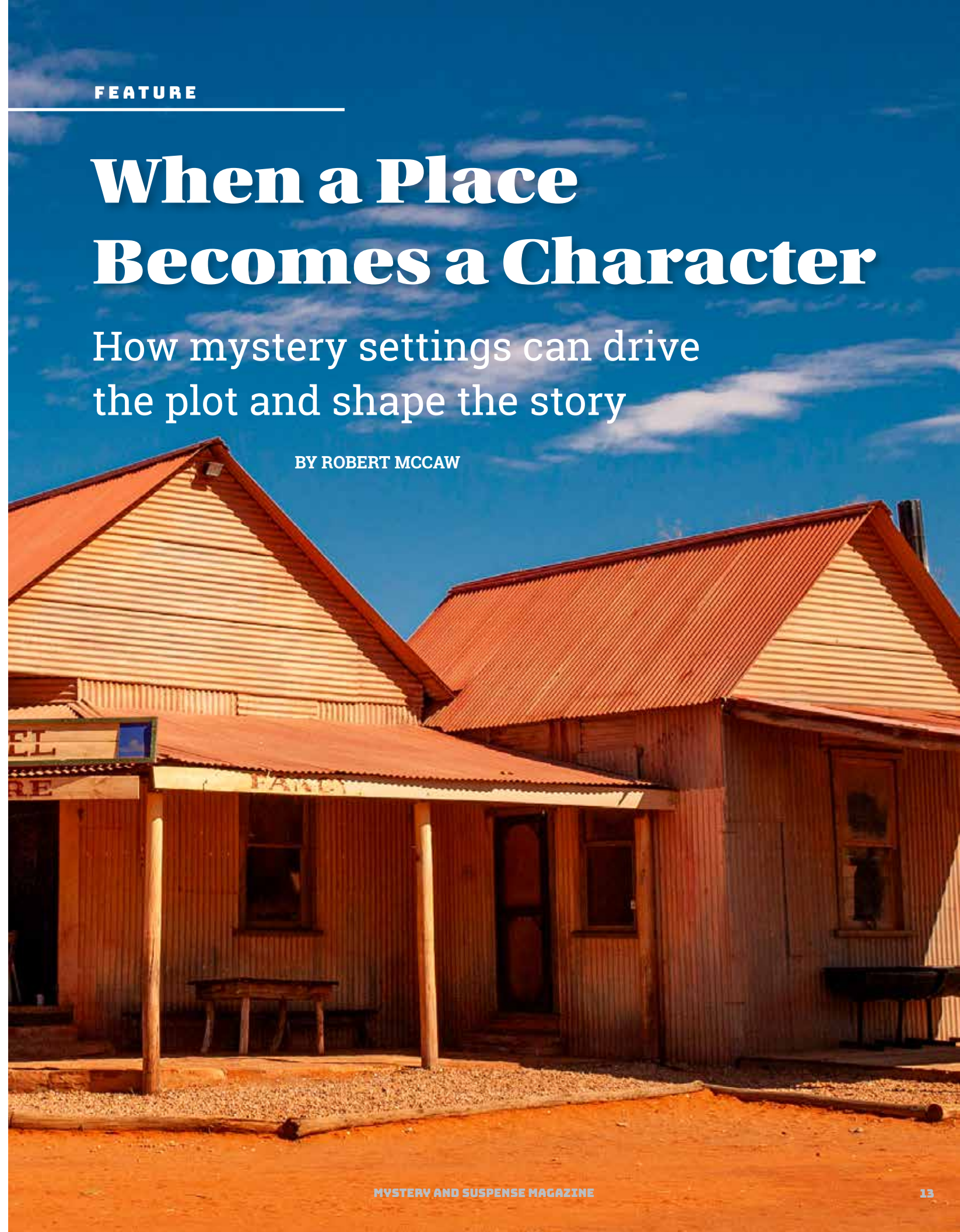
About the author

Charlene Bell Dietz's award-winning mystery novel *The Flapper, the Scientist, and the Saboteur* combines family saga with corporate espionage, and *The Flapper, the Impostor, and the Stalker* propels readers back into 1923 in frenetic Chicago. *The Scientist, the Psychic, and the Nut* gives readers a frightening Caribbean vacation. Two of her books won the coveted Kirkus stars and are named to Kirkus Reviews' Best Books of 2018. Visit inkydancestudios.com.

When a Place Becomes a Character

How mystery settings can drive the plot and shape the story

BY ROBERT MCCAOW



Every mystery has a setting. It can be as simple as the sparse interior of an interrogation room or as panoramic as the sweep of a Michener novel. The setting is often little more than a stage where actors come to perform and speak their lines. Sometimes, though, authors spin magic to craft an environment that becomes a character as integral to the plot as a protagonist.

These settings—not mere places but environments rich with lights and sounds, smells and weather, legends, customs, history, and foreign languages—leave an indelible mark on their players, shaping their thoughts and actions while effectively transporting readers to times and places unknown to them. Can anyone imagine Raymond Chandler’s worldly and cynical detective Philip Marlowe outside the glamour and grit of 1940s Los Angeles? Or Michael Connelly’s dogged yet irascible Harry Bosch without jazz, the view from his deck, and the “high jingo” foil of political influence emanating from the top floor of the LAPD headquarters?

As a devoted reader and writer of mysteries, I gravitate toward the genre’s novels whose settings are so animated. I hope similarly inclined readers will enjoy hearing about some of my favorites.

For Jane Harper, author of *The Dry*, *Force of Nature*, *The Lost Man*, *The Survivors*, and *Exiles*, the remote and unforgiving Australian Outback seeps out of the pores of many of her characters. They articulate its mostly arid landscape, speak its language, and know they must guard themselves and their loved ones against its ravages. In many ways, the Outback generates the mysteries they must decode while simultaneously offering up the clues they must follow.

Jumping halfway around the world, Joy Ellis sets many of her stories in the foreboding Fens of eastern England. In *The Patient Man*, Ellis describes the Fens as a place where “nature ruled, where the water and the sky and the wind shaped the land and the people who lived there.” And thus, Detective Inspector Nikki Galena, the protagonist in Ellis’s Crime on the Fens series, seems as if to emerge from the geography, weather, isolation, linguistic, and cultural qualities of the Fens, chasing mysteries inextricably linked to that isolated, misty, and foreboding place.

Turning north and west to the Outer Hebrides, Fin Macleod is the central character in *The Chessman* and other novels of Peter May’s Isle of Lewis trilogy. The Isle of

Lewis setting embodies a “world unto itself, a place where the traditions of the past still held sway and the rhythms of life were dictated by the seasons and the cycles of the sea.” Macleod’s personal history as a former islander has undoubtedly infused the stories’ air of authenticity and reinforced the extent to which the raw, untamed beauty of the setting has the power to shape the players and drive the plot.

In *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens sets a different kind of mystery story in the North Carolina marshes. This setting—“a fragile and vast mosaic of sound and smell, broken patterns of wind and water, the pulse of life beating, humming, breathing in every surface, sprout, and stem”—creates the protagonist, Kya, or “Marsh Girl.” At the same time, the hot, humid marsh, teeming with pulsating life unique to its surroundings, is integral to the mystery surrounding the death of Chase Andrews and, thus, indispensable to the plot.

As a third-generation game warden, Joe Pickett in C.J. Box’s novels is uniquely connected to the rural Wyoming landscapes he inhabits. The vast isolated, yet majestic landscape helps to explain Pickett’s sense of independence and reverence for nature. Giving rise to a sense of danger, the imposing grandeur of the Wyoming backdrops generates suspense and serves as the stage for the environmental conflicts that challenge Pickett.

No one captures the deep South’s atmosphere and complex racial currents like authors Greg Iles and James Lee Burke. Both use local history and culture to portray people and places as technicolor-rich as they are dangerous, dark, and starkly violent. For example, in Iles’ *Natchez Burning*, the story emerges from the city’s long secret and troubled past. In Burke’s *Neon Rain*, Robicheaux’s visit to the infamous Angola prison sets the tone for the New Orleans sleaze that follows and defines both characters and the plot.

Sticking with urban locales, Reykjavik, Iceland, is the setting for many of Araldur Indirdason’s novels. In *The Shadow District*, he uses the harsh and unforgiving landscape of the far north with its long dark winters to create a sense of isolation mirrored in the death of a reclusive 90-year-old man. Indirdason then uses Icelandic history in two timeframes—one of WWII vintage and the other more contemporaneous—to explore how time and war change the character of this unique city near the Arctic Circle.



John Rain, the protagonist of many of Barry Eisler’s novels, is alive with the richness of Tokyo’s teahouses, baths, nightclubs, and *dojōs*, or martial arts studios. Snippets of Japanese reinforce Rain’s intimate relationship with Tokyo and is integral to Rain’s backstory as half Japanese.

Then there is the international multi-setting. It requires an intimate knowledge of places far and wide around the globe and typically some theme to tie disparate locations together. In his recent *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, Daniel Silva returns to his earlier form, focusing on the

shady art markets of Venice, Paris, London, and New York. None of these places alone propels the story, but collectively they form an indispensable ambiance for the tale. It’s a good read in this era where frauds are not confined to the crypto markets.

Of course, there are many more authors whose settings help define their characters and inform their plots. If you have a favorite I’ve left out, please share it with me through my website.



About the author

Robert McCaw grew up in a military family, traveling the world. He is a graduate of Georgetown University, served as a U.S. Army lieutenant, and earned a law degree from the University of Virginia. Having lived on the Big Island of Hawaii, McCaw’s writing is imbued by his more than twenty-year love affair with this Pacific paradise. He now lives in New York City with his wife, Calli. *Retribution* is the fifth in his Koa Kāne Hawaiian Mystery Series. Learn more at robertmccaw.com.



Paul Tremblay
Bram Stoker award-winning author
paultremblay.net

Paul Tremblay

Paul Tremblay has won the Bram Stoker, British Fantasy, and Massachusetts Book awards and is the author of *Survivor Song*, *The Cabin at the End of the World*, *Disappearance at Devil's Rock*, *A Head Full of Ghosts*, the crime novels *The Little Sleep* and *No Sleep Till Wonderland*, and the short story collection, *Growing Things and Other Stories*.

His essays and short fiction have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Entertainment Weekly* online, and numerous year's best anthologies. He has a master's degree in mathematics and lives outside Boston with his family.

Q. What was the inspiration behind the title of your collection, *The Beast You Are*?

Paul: I knew that I was going to write an anthropomorphic animal novella as the anchor for the collection. What an odd thing to say, right?

I've long admired and been inspired by *Watership Down* (both the novel and the original film adaptation) as well as *The Secrets of Nimh*, and more recently, the novel *Ragged* (think *Wind in the Willows* meets *Fargo*) by Chris Irvin. My novella features all sorts of talking animals, including a would-be hero dog and a slasher cat. There's also a cult, backstabby politicians, and a giant monster who returns to the village for a blood sacrifice every thirty years.

Anyway, I often find story and title inspiration from my favorite bands/musicians. *The Beast You Are* by the band Big Business is one of my favorite records of the past five years. I was introduced to the two-piece band by film director Kevin Kolsch, though I missed the live performance/record release party because I had poison ivy up and down both my lobster arms. Which has nothing to do with anything, but I thought that title would be a perfect fit for the novella and the collection.

Q. Could you discuss the themes present in your collection and how they contribute to the overall narrative?

Paul: Within *Beast*, more than a handful (how many? depends on the size of your hand?) of the fifteen stories feature a monster/creature. Many of the other stories feature humans being monstrous, even if it's only them succumbing to, um, beastness, in their weakest moment. How do we process the transgression/transformation? Is that change mo-

mentary or permanent? Do we surrender to that change and allow it to dictate the rest of our lives? Can we forgive ourselves? How do we recognize and confront monstrousness? I hope the collection is creepy, entertaining, disturbing, and thrilling, but also leaves the readers with a melancholic sense of wonder at who the monsters are and how they came to be.

Q. How do you approach the blending of psychological suspense and horror in your short stories?

Paul: I don't ever go into a story thinking that I'm going to blend the above-mentioned genres, or any genres. My sole guide is the story. Every part and component have to serve the story. With that said, my favorite kinds of horror stories generally involve psychological suspense. I'm more than a little obsessed with the uncertainty and ambiguity of our daily lives and existence. Perfect fodder for horror, I think. Sure, the visceral thrills are cool in the moment, but what I find lingers are those moments of uncertainty, the cracks between things. As far as approach goes, I think, generally (not all the time), I try to make my stories feel as realistic as possible, even if there is intrusion from the supernatural. Then that dichotomy gets baked in, and the supernatural feels less real, which maybe makes it all feel more real, if that makes any sense.

Q. Your impressive career has included highlights ranging from film adaptation of your work to awards like the Bram Stoker Award for Novel and the Locus Award for Best Horror Novel. What's your perspective on your success? What are some of your favorite moments, looking back?

Paul: Well, thank you very much. Perspective? Publishing, and the entertainment industry in general, is beyond fickle, so whatever success I've had could go away/be quickly forgotten in a minute. I try to focus on what I can control: the day to day of what I'm writing, trying to make it the best thing it can be without putting too much extra pressure on myself to maintain "success." When stresses get too high, I remind myself that every writer will be forgotten someday, which is weirdly (maybe not so weirdly) a balm.

Favorite moment: My favorite isn't a moment. My favorite part of the whole messy thing are the talented good-hearted people I've become close friends with, people I never would have met had I not foolishly started writing. They know who they are.

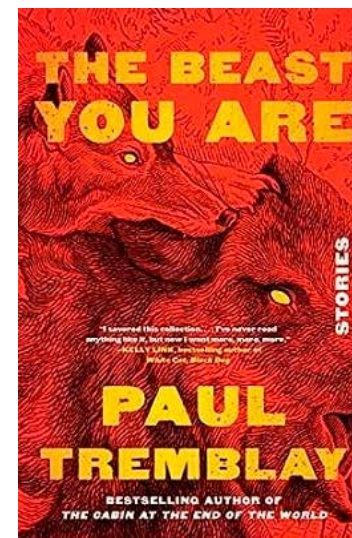
Honorable mention moments: getting my first book deal offer from William Morrow at halftime of a JV basketball game I was coaching, Stephen King tweeting about *A Head Full of Ghosts*, going to the *Knock at the Cabin* movie premiere with my family, pummeling John Langan in ping pong at NECON.

Q. What are you reading now?

Paul: I just finished reading *Maeve Fly* by CJ Leede (which was wonderfully disturbing and messed up), and I am currently reading and enjoying *All the Sinners Bleed* by SA Cosby.

Q. What's next?

Paul: I await edits for my next novel, *Horror Movie*: a novel, which will be out summer of 2024. My editor said she's loving it but it's disturbing. Which, well, yeah.



Paul Tremblay's latest: *The Beast You Are*

Paul Tremblay has won widespread acclaim for illuminating the dark horrors of the mind in novels and stories that push the boundaries of storytelling itself. The fifteen pieces in this brilliant collection, *The Beast You Are*, are all monsters of a kind, ready to loudly (and lovingly) smash through your head and into your heart.

In "The Dead Thing," a middle-schooler struggles to deal with the aftermath of her parents' substance addictions and split. One day, her little brother claims he found a shoebox with "the dead thing" inside. He won't show it to her and he won't let the box out of his sight. In "The Last Conversation," a person wakes in a sterile, white room and begins to receive instructions via intercom from a woman named Anne. When they are finally allowed to leave the room to complete a task, what they find is as shocking as it is heartbreaking.

The title novella, "The Beast You Are," is a mini epic in which the destinies and secrets of a village, a dog, and a cat are intertwined with a giant monster that returns to wreak havoc every thirty years.

A close-up photograph of a chessboard. In the foreground, a black king piece stands on the left, and a white pawn piece stands on the right. The chessboard is made of dark and light wood squares. In the background, several other chess pieces are visible but out of focus. The background is a solid blue color.

Underdogs of Suspense

They're not your typical heroes. Here are four unanticipated saviors from popular mystery and thriller books and movies.

In the dark and twisting alleys of suspense fiction, unexpected heroes often rise from the shadows to deliver a shock of enlightenment. Their unlikely prowess provides the necessary jolt to the plot, pushing the story to its climactic crescendo. At the heart of a captivating suspense tale, it's the character that becomes the driving force, rather than the plot. Unique and well-crafted characters add an extra layer of mystery and anticipation, magnetizing readers and viewers alike to the edge of their seats.

For a character in suspense fiction to truly shine, they must hold an air of mystique, be embroiled in compelling personal stakes, and possess an unexpected skillset. Unlikely heroes often defy the archetype of traditional protagonists. They may not be the smartest, strongest, or bravest, but their eccentricities, vulnerabilities, or sheer luck often turn the tables when it's least expected.

Now, in the heart-stopping realm of suspense, a coterie of improbable characters has made an indelible impact. Here are four such heroes, the unlikely sparks igniting the suspenseful stories they belong to.

THE DETECTIVE

Inspector Jacques Clouseau from the Pink Panther series has become an enduring figure in suspense fiction. Despite his bumbling nature, Clouseau (played to perfection by Peter Sellers in the movies) always manages to solve the crime, even if it's often by pure accident. His unconventional and often hilarious methods of investigation serve to increase the suspense, as audiences find themselves questioning how this seemingly inept inspector will ever uncover the truth. His consistent victory, despite the odds, enshrines Clouseau as an unlikely hero and an extraordinary character of suspense.

THE HACKER

Lisbeth Salander, the protagonist of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, defies the stereotype of a suspense hero with her punk appearance and antisocial behavior. She is not a suave detective or a seasoned investigator, but a hacker with a troubled past. Her unique set of skills, combined with her raw determination and resilience, make her an unexpected yet powerful character who constantly upends expectations. Salander's intelligence and resourcefulness shine in the face of danger, cementing her as one of the most intriguing characters in the genre.

THE PSYCHO

Next, navigating through the eerie realms of suspense fiction, the character Norman Bates, from Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, stands out. Anthony Perkins immortalized Bates on screen under the deft direction of Alfred Hitchcock. Despite being the villain of the story, Bates unexpectedly morphs into a sort of anti-hero by the end, forcing audiences to grapple with their feelings of sympathy toward him. This evocative character, with his horrifying secret and complicated psychology, hooks readers and viewers, making him a captivating figure in suspense fiction.



THE HITCHHIKER

Lastly, Arthur Dent from Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, while not from a traditional suspense series, certainly finds himself in numerous suspenseful situations. Dent, an ordinary human thrown into extraordinary cosmic adventures, survives through luck and the help of his eccentric alien friend. He is far from the stereotypical hero—no suave charisma, no heroic bravery—yet, his ability to muddle through in the face of immense danger offers an unconventional take on the suspense hero, adding an extra flavor to the genre.

HEROES WHO SURPRISE

These characters, each unique in their quirks and qualities, underscore the importance of the unexpected in suspense fiction. They challenge the norms of heroism, bring unpredictability to the table, and give readers or

viewers something to latch onto amidst the mysteries and twists of the plot. Whether it's a bumbling inspector, a punk hacker, a sympathetic villain, or a hapless space adventurer, these unlikely heroes carry the torch of suspense, enlightening their narratives with their singular charm.

These underdogs of suspense serve as a testament to the genre's flexibility and the power of innovative characterization. Their peculiarities, strengths, and vulnerabilities amplify the suspense, making the journey towards revelation a thrilling ride. It's not about who seems most likely to succeed at the onset, but who, in the face of danger and uncertainty, can surprise, confound expectations, and save the day. From the page to the screen, their allure lies in their unpredictability, a cardinal trait in suspense fiction. And their victories feel sweeter, their journeys more exhilarating for it.

After all, heroism can come from the most unexpected of sources.



James Rollins
New York Times bestselling author
jamesrollins.com

James Rollins

James Rollins is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of international thrillers. His writing has been translated into more than forty languages and has sold more than 20 million books. The *New York Times* says, “Rollins is what you might wind up with if you tossed Michael Crichton and Dan Brown into a particle accelerator together.” NPR calls his work, “Adventurous and enormously engrossing.” Rollins unveils unseen worlds, scientific breakthroughs, and historical secrets matched with stunning suspense. As a veterinarian, he had a practice in Sacramento for over a decade and still volunteers at local shelters.

Q. *Tides of Fire* sounds like a riveting thriller, set on an international research station in the Coral Sea. What can you tell us about it?

James: I describe it as an epic disaster movie in novel format. As an entire region of the world is on the precipice of geological collapse, Sigma Force must contend with the discovery of a bizarre ecosystem miles beneath the ocean, while far above the United States and China vie for dominance both across the seas of Southeast Asia and in a race for the moon. At the same time, an old enemy of Sigma resurfaces with their own agenda. The key to everything ties back to the eruption of Mount Tambora in the nineteenth century and to the rich mythology and aboriginal belief systems of Australia’s First Peoples. How that all hangs together? You gotta read the book. It’s one wild rollercoaster ride both under the sea and across a burning region of the world.

Q. *Tides of Fire* marks the latest addition to your successful Sigma Force series. What inspired the central plot and themes of this new installment, and how does it connect with the overarching narrative of the series?

James: I’m always looking for two things when I concoct a story: a bit of science that makes me go “what if?” and some historical mystery that I might be able to tackle within the pages of a book. For *Tides of Fire*, the science covers the current space race going on between the United States and China and the strange biology of corals, cephalopods, and the bizarre life forms found in the planet’s deepest trenches. As to the history, the central mystery of the novel ties back to the vicious competition among naturalists in Southeast Asia during the nineteenth century and into the secrets buried in the stories and myths of the First Peoples of Australia.

Q. The locations in your novels often play a significant role in the story. Can you share some details about the settings in *Tides of Fire* and the research you conducted to bring them to life?

James: The story mainly takes place across the breadth of Southeast Asia, both on the surface and deep beneath the sea. I’ve spent considerable time in Australia, both diving on the Great Barrier Reef and exploring Aboriginal mythology. It was those trips that inspired me to write this book. The story itself opens in Hong Kong, where I was able to visit many of the actual locations. Also featured prominently are a series of museums in both Singapore and Java. I was able to visit the natural history museum in Singapore, and after writing this story, I’m anxious to visit Java’s history museum, too.

Q. The Sigma Force characters have grown and evolved throughout the series. How do the events in *Tides of Fire* challenge and develop the characters, both individually and as a team?

James: What I love best about writing a series is that you get to explore the larger arc of a character’s life, something you can’t necessarily do with a stand-alone adventure. While I love to build a rollercoaster of an adventure, to truly keep a reader in suspense, readers must grow attached to the characters that I put through the gristmill of a story. And an ongoing series is a great way to endear a character to a reader. In my last Sigma novel (*Kingdom of Bones*), one major character was sidelined, namely Seichan—a former assassin and now ally to Sigma. After publication, I received a slew of emails demanding her return. And of course, I listened—though in truth her return was always planned. Plus, in this new novel, an old enemy of Seichan and Sigma resurfaces to add stress to an already contentious situation.

Q. Your novels are known for their scientific and historical elements. In *Tides of Fire*, what specific scientific or historical aspects were particularly fascinating or challenging to incorporate into the story?

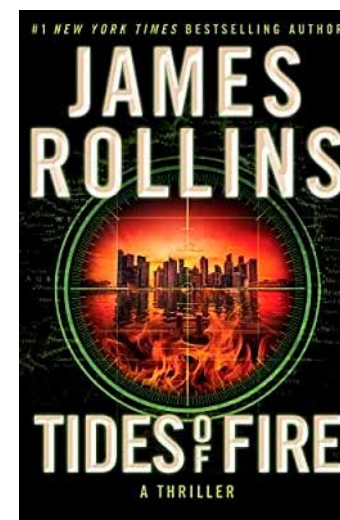
James: I’ve already mentioned some of the scientific and historical aspects of the novel. But what I’ve left unsaid—and what is probably the most revelatory aspect of the novel—is that *Tides of Fire* also explores a question that continues to confound all people: Are we alone in the universe? I’m sure I’m not the only one to note the sudden declassification of huge volumes of documents by the Pentagon regarding UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon). The military has also established a new agency to explore such phenomenon in greater detail. As a writer who loves mysteries and secrets, all this sudden uptick in released information has made me wonder: Is the government trying to prepare us for something? In *Tides of Fire*, you’re about to find out.

Q. For readers who are new to the Sigma Force series, can *Tides of Fire* be enjoyed as a standalone novel? What elements from previous books do you think are essential for newcomers to understand before diving into this latest installment?

James: I suspect few people have actually read my series in the order they were written. I purposefully construct my Sigma stories so a new reader can jump in anywhere and not feel lost. This is certainly true with *Tides of Fire*. Whatever old backstory or previous plot elements are needed to appreciate the novel, I’m going to lay it all out for that new reader—or that old reader who might have forgotten some details between various novels.

Q. What’s next?

James: I just finished up *The Obsidian Dragon*, the third book in the Moonfall Saga, an epic fantasy set on a world that stopped turning ages ago, leaving one side forever sunblasted and the other eternally frozen in darkness. I’m also working on the next Sigma book, which picks up immediately after the explosive conclusion to *Tides of Fire*.



James Rollins’s latest: *Tides of Fire*

The Titan Project—an international research station off the coast of Australia—discovers a thriving zone of life in an otherwise dead sea. The area teems with a strange bioluminescent coral that defies science, yet holds great promise for the future. But the loss of a military submarine in the area triggers a brutal attack and sets in motion a geological disaster that destabilizes an entire region.

Massive quakes, volcanic eruptions, and deadly tsunamis herald a greater cataclysm to come—for something is stirring miles under the ocean, a threat hidden for millennia.

As seas turn toxic and coastlines burn, can Sigma Force stop what has been let loose—especially as an old adversary returns, hunting them and thwarting their every move? For any hope of success, Commander Gray Pierce must search for a key buried in the past, hidden deep in Aboriginal mythology. But what Sigma could uncover is even more frightening—something that will shake the very foundations of humanity.



Unsolved Mysteries

Three books on spine-tingling unsolved mysteries

Hold on tight to the edge of that seat, mystery enthusiasts! Delving into the world of unsolved mysteries, tantalizing tales of the unknown and the unexplainable are about to unravel. Shrouded in secrecy and notorious for their baffling puzzles, these exceptional books are renowned for their ability to send a shiver down the spine of even the most hardened sleuth.

THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY

Picture the scene. The bright lights of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago glisten, revealing the shadowy underside of America's great metropolis. Among this hubbub of innovation and optimism, a dark presence lurks. *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* by Erik Larson plunges readers into a historical non-fiction thriller, meticulously unraveling the threads of mystery around the infamous H.H. Holmes. Though some enigmas are exposed, others persist, keeping readers rapt with intrigue.

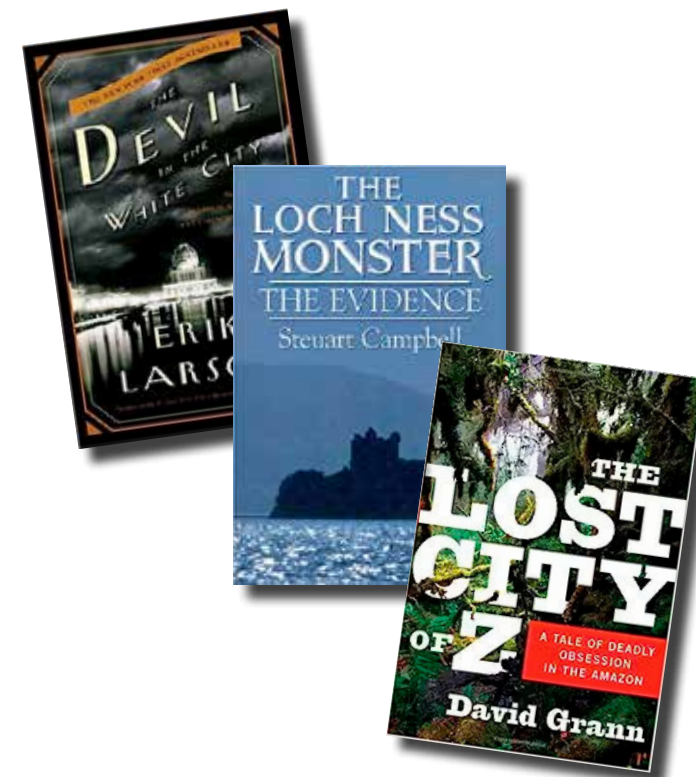
THE LOST CITY OF Z

Transitioning to the labyrinthine depths of the Amazon, *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon* by David Grann is another spellbinding tale steeped in mystery. The book illuminates the quixotic quest of Percy Fawcett, his burning obsession with an ancient lost city, and his subsequent vanishing act. Simultaneously, it traces Grann's own foray into the verdant, unforgiving jungle, echoing Fawcett's journey and the unanswered questions that continue to haunt it.

THE LOCH NESS MONSTER

Moving from the terrestrial and aerial unknown to the aquatic abyss, *The Loch Ness Monster: The Evidence* by Steuart Campbell scrutinizes one of the world's most enduring enigmas. The murky waters of Loch Ness have been the stage for countless sightings and stories of a mythical creature. The book casts a critical gaze on the evidence, probing the tantalizing puzzle of the Loch Ness Monster. With every analyzed photograph and eyewitness account, the mystery deepens, the waters remain inscrutable, and the legend continues to captivate.

Each of these three works hinges on an unsolved mystery, a seemingly impenetrable conundrum. They invite readers into a world where answers remain elusive, where every revelation unearths another question. The attraction lies in the tantalizing promise of the unknown, the thrill of unraveling the truth, the joy of connecting the dots, and the anticipation that builds with each turn of the page. Unresolved mysteries echo the complexity of the world and the enigma of human nature itself. They are a nod to the curiosity that thrives within every reader, kindling the flame of inquisitiveness and the yearning for discovery. Indeed, the appeal of unsolved mysteries is as timeless as the mysteries themselves.





Nita Prose
New York Times bestselling author
nitaprose.com

Nita Prose

Nita Prose is the author of *The Maid*, a #1 New York Times bestseller and a Good Morning America Book Club Pick. Nominated for an Edgar Award and winner of the Ned Kelly Award for International Crime Fiction and a Goodreads Choice Award, *The Maid* has been published in more than forty countries and has sold over a million copies worldwide.

Q. How did the character of Molly Gray evolve from *The Maid* to *The Mystery Guest*?

Nita: Molly in *The Mystery Guest* has matured as a person. She's able to read human behaviors better. The longer she lives, the more she learns. Is that any different from anyone? I don't think so.

It was such a joy to step behind her eyes again and discover the layers of wisdom Molly has always carried within her. Sometimes, to really understand who you are, you have to dig around in your past to make sense of things. And this novel is all about that metaphorical excavation process, one that for Molly ends in hard-earned, dynamic growth.

Q. Could you discuss the role of the Regency Grand Hotel as a setting in the story?

Nita: Hotels fascinate me. They are miniature hierarchies where the highly valued guest reigns supreme at the top of the pyramid and a maid like Molly toils invisibly behind the scenes. But while The Regency Grand appears the very picture of refinement and elegance, as we move through the novel, we discover that it houses many dirty secrets. That's the beauty of a hotel setting: anything can happen behind all those closed doors!

Q. What are you reading right now? What have you read lately that you enjoyed?

Nita: One of my favorite thrillers of 2023 is *The Whispers*, by Ashley Audrain. It's a gripping, ground-shaking novel about the 3 M's—motherhood, marriage, and midlife. It starts with a neighborhood barbecue among a close-knit

group of friends, but when the guests hear through the window a mother yelling at her young son and this same son later falls out of that window, the entire community starts to unravel.

Q. In 2021, a film adaptation of your blockbuster hit *The Maid* was announced, with Florence Pugh cast in the lead role. Any update on that? What are your thoughts, in general, about screen adaptations of novels?

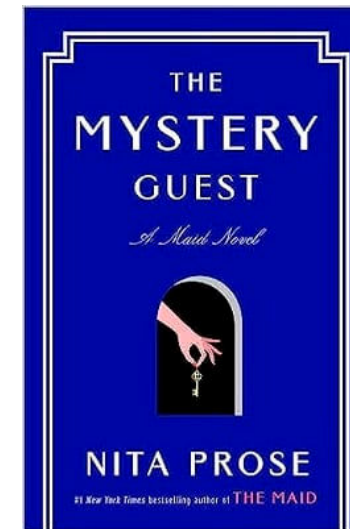
Nita: It's a hard time in Hollywood at the moment, as we all know. Writers and actors are fighting hard for their rights, and as such I think a lot of adaptations, including the film adaptation of *The Maid*, are progressing slowly at the moment.

As for how I feel about the book-to-screen process, it absolutely fascinates me! I have always felt that a film or TV show based on a book is a separate work of art, kind of like a translation. For me, what I'll be most curious and excited about with the film adaptation is seeing the Regen-

cy Grand Hotel come to vivid life on screen. My job as a novelist is to offer just enough description for readers to use their imaginations to create the rest, but a film offers a fulsome Technicolor portrait, and what fun it will be to see that whole hotel visually evoked!

Q. What's next? Can we expect more of Molly's adventures in the future?

Nita: I think it's possible that there will be more Molly in the future, but not right away. At the moment, I'm working on something that is a departure from the world of *The Maid* ... and yet, no matter what I write, I cannot escape myself. My style and hallmarks are ever-present; I'm drawn to unusual voices, and I love the experience of stepping so deeply inside of a point of view that I become someone else on the page. I also look for the heart in everything. Because it's that heart—a tender rhythm beating in the background—that's the real mystery my characters are trying to solve.



Nita Prose's latest: *The Mystery Guest*

Molly Gray is not like anyone else. With her flair for cleaning and proper etiquette, she has risen through the ranks of the glorious five-star Regency Grand Hotel to become the esteemed Head Maid. But just as her life reaches a pinnacle state of perfection, her world is turned upside down when J.D. Grimthorpe, the world-renowned mystery author, drops dead—very dead—on the hotel's tea room floor.

When Detective Stark, Molly's old foe, investigates the author's unexpected demise, it becomes clear that this death was murder most foul. Suspects abound, and everyone wants to know: who killed J.D. Grimthorpe? Was it Lily, the new Maid-in-Training? Or was it Serena, the author's secretary? Could Mr. Preston, the hotel's beloved doorman, be hiding something? And is Molly really as innocent as she seems?

As the case threatens the hotel's pristine reputation, Molly knows she alone holds the key to unlocking the killer's identity. But that key is buried deep in her past—because long ago, she knew J.D. Grimthorpe. Molly begins to comb her memory for clues, revisiting her childhood and the mysterious Grimthorpe mansion where she and her dearly departed Gran once worked side by side. With the entire hotel under investigation, Molly must solve the mystery post-haste. If there's one thing Molly knows for sure, it's that dirty secrets don't stay buried forever...



Family First

BY DELVIN CHATTERSON

Guests arriving by float plane on a clear day at the fishing camp on the north shore of Lake Superior had a magnificent view of the scenery around their destination. Much better than staring at Google Earth on a computer screen, the view from the air was mesmerizing; no digital enhancement required. The dark blue lake surface glistened in the sunlight, stretching east and west, and disappearing over the horizon to the south toward Michigan and Minnesota. Arriving guests looked down on the rugged, wild terrain of the Canadian Shield surrounding the log cabins and lodge of the fishing camp along the shore, and stretching north with its scattered, small irregular-shaped lakes and spindly spruce and pine trees clutching the smooth, rounded, grey granite rock. To the east of the camp, they would see Rocky River winding for miles through the rocks with the white water of rapids visible in the distance.

Today, they might even have seen the black bear that was on the shoreline below the rapids. But they probably would not have seen the body that the bear was gnawing on in the shallow water between the rocks.

Out on the lake, beyond the island that formed a natural breakwater in the middle of the bay in front of the camp was a wide, flat-bottomed aluminum boat with a powerful outboard motor on the stern. It was gently moving forward with four people aboard. The motor looked like it had the power to pull four water-skiers across the lake, but today the guests were here only for fishing. Their three trolling fishing lines were leaving miniature wakes in the flat water behind the boat. Pat Hanford was the gui-

de sitting at the stern, looking out from under his broad-brimmed Tilley hat with one hand loosely holding the throttle of the outboard. He was one of the more experienced guides, working at the camp for his sixth summer. It was a welcome relief every year from his heavy load of teaching responsibilities at a private college in Minneapolis; also a change of scenery from the city landscapes that were losing their appeal for him. He'd grown up in a small town in northern Minnesota and summers on the north shore of Lake Superior gave him time to appreciate the fresh air and solitude of long hikes in the bush. He found working at the fishing camp was also a unique opportunity to meet some people distinctly different from the pampered spoiled brats at the school and their arrogant, entitled parents.

Pat looked around the boat at the guests he would be spending a few hours with out on the water this morning. It was an exceptionally hot day with very little breeze to cool them off. Everyone was wearing a hat and sunglasses and they were well-covered in sunscreen, but their fashion choices were a diverse mix. Up front, lounging across their seats, were two heavy set young men from Minneapolis. Both were dozing in the sun, each with one hand on a fishing rod which was securely clamped into the holder so that a good catch didn't pull it into the depths of Lake Superior. They were recovering from another late night of drinking and poker and resting up for more of the same. They weren't that interested in fishing, but *what the hell*, it was part of the package. Pat had already forgotten their last

names. He thought their first names were Luke and Marco. They were both in tee-shirts, shorts and sandals, exposing a lot of bulging hairy skin and it was not that attractive. The bearded one Pat thought was Luke had on a straw cowboy hat like a Mexican caballero and was wearing a yellow and black tee-shirt with the image of a Harley-Davidson stretched across his round belly. Pat had noticed earlier the words on the back; *If you can read this, the bitch fell off.*

Marco, the one with unkempt, thick black hair and the dark shadow of unshaven whiskers, was more appropriately dressed for the occasion with a camouflage peaked hat in olive green and brown, bought in the tackle shop back at the lodge. It had a Minnesota badge above the peak that read, *Land of 10,000 lakes. And no fuckin' fish!*

Pat looked to his left at the more attractive middle-aged woman who was leaning against the side watching her fishing line trailing behind the boat. She was tall, slim but curvaceous, dressed in a flower-patterned linen short-sleeved shirt with beige cotton shorts revealing long, tanned brown legs. She had crossed her legs and dangled one blue sandal from her toes. Totally relaxed, and also not that interested in fishing, she was basking in the warm summer sun out on the lake.

Pat leaned forward to ask her quietly without disturbing the two men from Minneapolis, "You told me you were from Toronto. Are your brothers here from Toronto too?" She turned slowly toward him and didn't look any more enthusiastic about starting a conversation than she was about the fishing. She nodded. "Yeah. We work together in Toronto."

"Ah," said Pat, "a family business. That's interesting. What business are you in?"

He saw her straighten up to face him and, not very subtly, clench her teeth in a forced smile. *OK, I guess we're going to have a little chit-chat.* "It was my father's business," she said. "He was in telecommunications." She paused before continuing, but he looked interested, and the fishing was boring. "Remember Northern Telecom, a big success story in Canada that went belly-up a few years ago? It was a big financial scandal and a disaster for investors and thousands of employees around the world. My father was smart enough to get out and take his money and his patents with him about twenty years ago. He did very well with his business, but he, uh ... died, about five years ago and we inherited the business."

"I see. That can be hard, for the family and the busi-

ness," said Pat. "I lecture in business and finance at a small college in Minneapolis and we have a few case studies about the challenges of running a family business, especially through succession and the transfer of ownership to the next generation."

"Not a big problem," she said and smirked. "Fortunately, I'm pretty good at managing my two younger brothers." Then she frowned at him. "So, what are you doing at a fishing camp for the summer? Most college professors travel the world, write a book, or sell consulting during their summer holidays."

Pat shrugged. "Just not my thing." He looked ahead to check his bearings and then behind the boat to ensure the lines were not tangling. "Not ready to write a book yet, but maybe you can tell me your story and I can use it for a new case study."

"It's not that interesting a story," she said.

"Give me *something* to work with," said Pat. "I can make it more interesting in the case study. So, you're the president? And the boss of your brothers?"

The woman shook her head. "It's more complicated than that."

"Fantastic! I'm sure you have some good material for a case study. I'll change the names and details, of course, to protect the innocent." He smiled at her and stuck out his hand to shake on it. "My name's Pat, Pat Hanford. In case you decide to sue me at some point." He laughed out loud.

She gave him a faint smile and gently shook his hand. "I'm not telling you much. And everything is strictly confidential, of course. Or I will sue you."

"Got it. Your name's Richardson, right? You're Helen, and your brothers are Pete and Robbie?"

"That's right. You have been paying attention." Pat always paid attention to the women among the guests at the fishing camp. Sometimes they were fishing for something they weren't getting at home, and he occasionally got lucky himself while the men were out trying to get lucky on the lake. He'd noticed that Helen Richardson seemed to be unattached and she was starting to appeal to him. Maybe she was amenable to more than chatting and cruising on the lake.

Helen added, "Pete's actually the president. I'm the oldest, but there was no way my dad was going to let a woman be president. Robbie's the youngest, he and I are executive vice-presidents. We run the holding company and the family trust together with our mother. Dad split

the shares between the three of us at thirty percent each, plus ten percent for Mum. She's not that interested in the business, she's too busy spending the money she already took out."

"I'll tell you what, Helen," Pat said, leaning forward to avoid raising his voice and attracting the attention of the two still dozing up front. "That's enough for me to guess at some of the issues and give you some suggestions how I think you could get past them. No-charge consulting if you like."

"Sounds more interesting than fishing," said Helen. "But you should also look after your other guests." She nodded toward the two men stretched out in the sun. "The fishing is so slow it's putting them to sleep."

"It's OK, they're here to sleep mostly anyway. They'll be pissed if I have to wake them up to haul in a big pike. They're an ugly, bony fish nobody wants, and I usually release them back into the water. Everybody prefers to catch a big, beautiful, tasty lake trout they can take back to the cook for dinner at the lodge."

Helen took another look at them. "I have to say, these guys don't look like the outdoors type. City boys doing the bad boy routine, not fishermen. We have their type in Toronto too. But what are they doing here in the bush at your fishing camp?"

"Ah, that's a little complicated, too," said Pat.

Helen raised her eyebrows at him. "All right, so let's hear your story first. Maybe I'll learn something before we even get to my story."

Pat looked over at the two bodies stretched out sound asleep at the front of the boat. He looked at her and hesitated a moment. "You know what they say..." He leaned closer and said quietly, "If I tell you too much, they'll have to..." He ran a finger under his chin across his neck in a slicing motion.

She looked alarmed and sat back quickly.

"Sorry," he continued in a whisper. "A little overdramatic, maybe, but these guys are from what I call the Mid-West Mafia in Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis. It's not generally known, and you won't see it in the About Us page on our website, but they own this place."

Helen's eyes went wider, and she mouthed a silent, "What?"

"The Sarducci family, they make the crime pages sometimes. They come here a lot because it's just over the border and into Canada, away from the prying eyes of

American law enforcement. Lots of private meetings, lots of drinking, sometimes they even go fishing." He tilted his head at the two men up front whose hands had dropped off the idle fishing rods. "If they bring their guns here there's a little more paperwork for them, but the RCMP and the OPP don't usually ask too many questions and registering with Canadian Border Services is voluntary, so they don't always bother. Some of them bring some pretty heavy-duty firepower, though, and they're not here for the big game. No fun in that, they tell me, the big game don't shoot back."

Helen sat up straight, closed her mouth, and swallowed.

Pat decided to continue while he had her attention. "They seem to do a lot of shooting in the woods, mostly at stationary targets. Not usually at each other. But you know the Mafia movie, *Godfather II*? Where Al Pacino sends his younger brother out in a boat, and they blow him up? Well, sometimes I worry about that. Hasn't happened yet, but it's not the way we want to lose a boat."

Helen frowned. "Now you're shitting me, right?"

"Like I said, a little dramatic license to improve on the story. It also makes for a better case study. But it's mostly true. These families are here pretty regularly. And they enjoy the place just as much as you and your brothers." He looked over at the two men again. "I think we better get these two in out of the sun, though, I don't want them pissed at me for letting them get baked red like lobsters. Don't want them to blow up this boat."

Helen shook her head again and turned to start reeling in her line.

Pat hollered, "OK, guys. Time to give up on the fish jumping into the boat for us. Let's call it a day and head back for lunch." The two men stirred and took a look at their fishing rods like they'd never been introduced. "I'll get it," said Pat. He kept low in the boat and moved forward to bring in their lines and lay the rods in the bottom of the boat. On returning to the stern, he revved the engine for a little more speed and headed around the island toward the fishing lodge. Helen and the two men settled in for the ride.

On the way back, Helen told Pat she was starting to worry about her brothers, Pete and Robbie, who had left the camp a few days ago with some of the other guests to paddle down Rocky River. They were expected back at the camp within three days and this was now the fourth day since they had left. Some of the others had already returned.

As they chatted over their lunch, Pat persuaded Helen to join him in a smaller boat to go along the shoreline to the east toward Rocky River. That way they might meet Helen's brothers paddling back to camp from the outlet of the river into the lake. He also told Helen the scenery and the fishing would be better too if they stayed close to shore.

"You can do the fishing," she said. "I'll take a few souvenir photos just for the hell of it. My cell phone has a pretty good camera for scenery. I'm not into those friggin' selfies that everybody's posting on the internet."

"I'll show you a good spot for some photos you can post when you get home," said Pat. "You know how these grey, rounded granite humps look like the backs of whales, if you use your imagination?" He gestured to the shoreline where the round granite hillsides ended in cliffs that dropped off into the water. "Well, there's a couple of big whalebacks out in the water along here that will give you some good fish stories to take back home."

She smiled, "Sure, just what I need for my Facebook page. Bragging about my exotic fishing trip at Camp Winnetonka, just to piss off my friends."

"That's the whole idea," said Pat. "It's good advertising for us too. Don't forget the link to our website." He gave her his best charming smile.

She flicked her eyebrows at him. "You think I should add a note about it being lousy for fishing but very popular as a training camp for Mafia hitmen? That this is where the bodies are buried?"

"No. You can leave that out." He was shaking his head. "Forget all that stuff I told you, please. I was just trying to make your day a little more interesting with some stories about our other guests. Strictly confidential, like you said."

"Well, interesting is not the right word when you tell me my brothers are out on the river with some murderous gangsters and their guns."

"Don't worry about it. Your brothers will take off in the canoe and the boys in their big rubber raft will never catch up. They'll probably pull into the first sandbar and start partying before the raft sinks with all the booze they've got onboard."

"Jesus. Now you're telling me my brothers are out there with a bunch of drunken gangsters with guns."

"Don't blame me for setting this up. You said you arranged this trip so they could have a brotherly bonding experience." He laughed. "Maybe fighting off gangsters is just what they need." Helen did not look amused. "I'm sure

they'll be fine," said Pat. "Everybody has a great experience out there. Pete and Robbie just need to pay attention to the rapids. They're more dangerous than the other guys on the river."

"OK. Let's hope they survive those too. But you said it's about fifty miles down the river and it only takes two days of paddling to get all the way back down to the lake."

"Yeah, that's right. Experienced paddlers in a hurry can do it in two days. Most people spend two nights in campsites along the river and take three days on the river."

"But this is the fourth day for my brothers and the bad boys," said Helen.

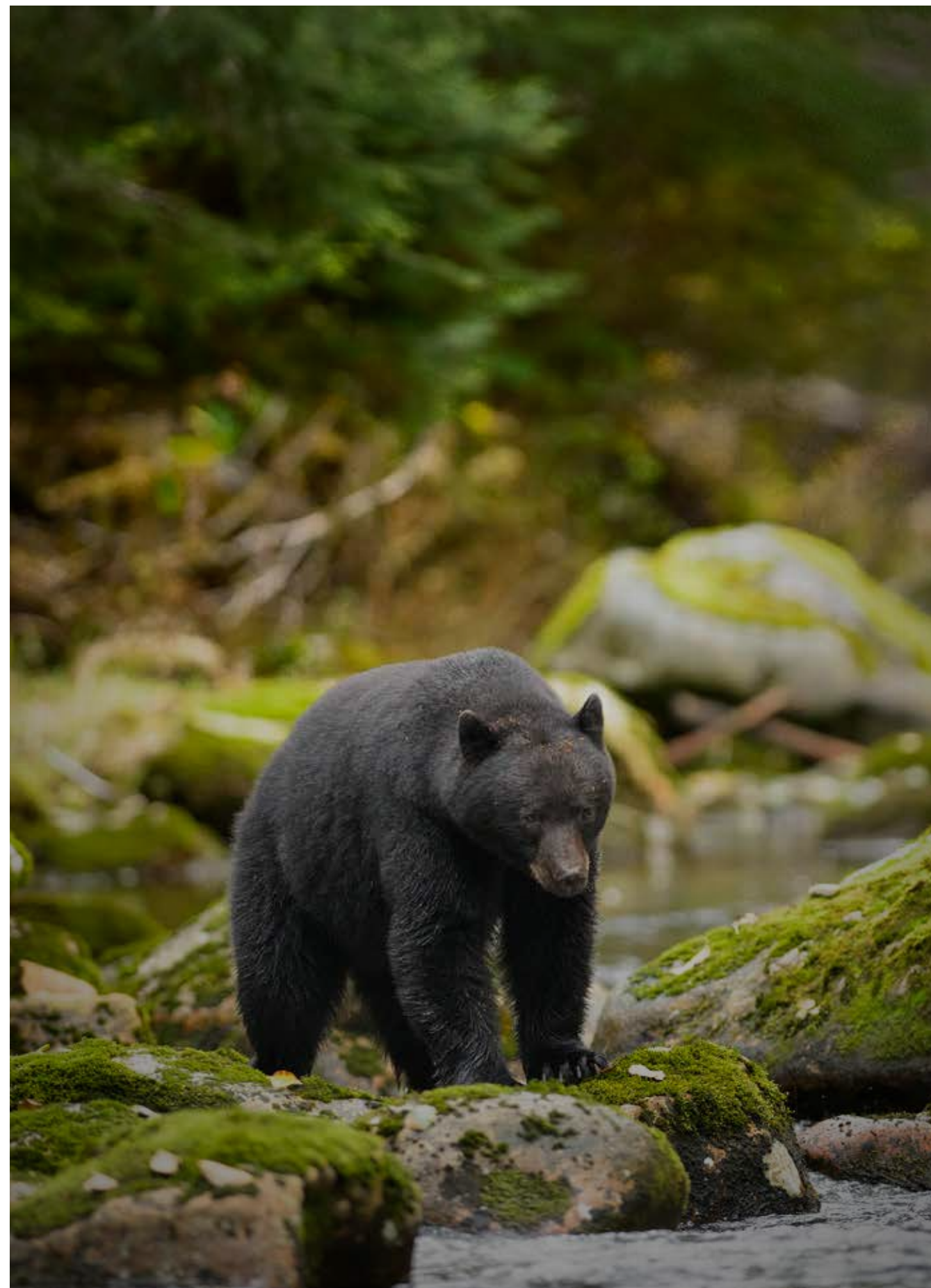
"Maybe your brothers took more beer and did more bonding than you thought." Pat shrugged. "There's lots of good camping spots and fishing holes on the way down the river. That's why we always pack more than enough food and supplies for three days."

He looked past Helen and gestured over her shoulder. "There's your photo opportunity," he said. "Don't drop your phone in the water. It's too damn cold and deep for me to go down for it. And that's not included in your package." Helen swung her leg over to straddle the seat and face the grey rounded hump that rose from the water in front of the large island in the distance. She gave Pat a look that suggested she was not impressed but reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone to focus the camera on *the big one that got away*.

Pat watched her for a moment then squinted into the distance farther east behind her. He pulled his backpack out from under the seat and brought out a pair of binoculars that he raised to his eyes and adjusted the focus. "You can relax, Helen," he said. "The boys are on the way home. I see a raft and a canoe coming our way."

Helen turned to look back at Pat, then swung around to look over the bow in the direction he was looking. As she turned and put her feet forward her knee bumped the phone out of her hand and she juggled it over her lap and across the seat to fall on the floorboards; not in the water. She grabbed it quickly and stuffed it back in her pocket before she looked back at Pat. "Oops," she said. Then she turned again to look toward the boats in the distance. She peered at them for a moment then reached back for the binoculars. "Let me look," she said.

Pat still had the binoculars up to his eyes. "Something's wrong. They're towing an empty canoe behind the raft." He handed the binoculars to Helen and reached for the



throttle to accelerate the boat forward and close the distance between them. As they got closer, he saw there were six men in the raft, not the five who had started on the river together. The canoe tied behind the raft had no one in it.

As they approached, one of the men in front gestured for them to pull in closer. Then Robbie, the younger brother, stood up in the middle of the raft and yelled toward Helen, "I lost him in the rapids! I lost Pete!"

They all went back to the lodge together and Pat called search and rescue to tell them they had lost a paddler on the river. He then took the bigger flat-bottom boat and outboard motor with enough horsepower to go back up the river to start looking for Pete Richardson. Helen insisted on coming along. Robbie and another guide from the camp were in the boat with them and they were all scanning ahead along the riverbank on both sides.

Robbie was agitated and nervous and couldn't look anyone in the eye after the tearful exclamations to his sister. "We were doing fine in the rapids! Then ... suddenly a big wave flipped us over ... Pete fell out of the canoe into the rocks."

"Maybe he swam out like Robbie did," Pat suggested to Helen. "If he came out farther upstream in the rocks or the bush, they wouldn't have found each other."

They were searching from the powerboat on the river for almost two hours before they saw the black bear on the shore. They kept to the center of the river, avoiding the rocks and watching the bear. Suddenly, they realized the bear was mauling a body.

Robbie and Helen recognized Pete immediately. They both broke down in tears and clutched at each other in agony at the sight of their brother, mangled and bleeding on the rocks. Pat pulled in to the shore below the rocks and they dragged the boat onto the riverbank and tied it up to a tree. They all got out and cautiously approached the bear and Pete Richardson's body. Pat hollered and banged rocks together in his hands to scare the bear off. Startled, the bear looked up at the four of them, then scampered over the rocks and ran away from the river and into the woods. They were about to move closer to Pete's body when they heard the roar of another boat on the river. They looked back and saw men in fluorescent orange search-and-rescue jackets standing in the bow.

"Don't touch anything until they get here," said Pat. "He's not alive, I can tell you that." Pat moved close enough

to look at the bloated body, with torn and partially eaten flesh, lying face down in the shallow water with an ugly gash in the back of his head. He noticed there was no helmet and no life jacket on the body. He whirled around to glare at Robbie. "What the fuck were you doing? You said you were experienced paddlers and we told you to follow safety procedures! No fucking helmet and no life jacket in the rapids? Are you fucking nuts? Look at him!"

Robbie looked sheepish. "It was too hot for the helmet and life jackets..."

"Look at his smashed skull! Like he was whacked with an axe. That's what those rocks in the river can do! I told you to be careful." Pat was shaking his head and walked away toward the second boat pulling in beside theirs. "This is not good. Fuck, fuck, fuck! And I've gotta explain it to the owners."

Back at the lodge later in the evening, after the police had arrived and asked all their questions and left with Pete Richardson's body, Helen quietly approached Robbie's bedroom in their cabin away from the main lodge. He was exhausted and emotionally drained after long interviews with the OPP provincial police officers and he had gone to lie down without going to dinner. Helen checked her cell phone and tapped at the screen before squeezing the side button to turn off the touchscreen and slip the phone into the side pocket of her fashionable grey track pants. She went into the room, closed the door behind her and looked at Robbie slouched in an armchair in the corner beside his bed.

She snarled at him, "What the fuck did you do out there?"

Robbie sat up straight and looked at the door before putting his finger to his lips to shush her. Without raising his voice, he said, "You told me to arrange an end to our problems with Pete and I did."

She lowered her voice to speak softly but clearly. "I said to bond with your brother! And you whacked him with an axe?"

"It was the back of the axe. C'mon, Helen, I know what you really wanted. You should be proud of me. I finally did something right for you."

She glared at him. "What really happened?"

He smiled to himself and sat up straighter in the chair. "I had a plan. We talked about it."

Helen looked alarmed. "We talked about your plan to

run the rapids. You never told me you planned to kill him!"

Robbie shrugged. "Whatever. Here's what happened. We got away from the others right at the start and paddled ahead to camp the first night on shore. The next day we went on down the river to the campsite above the rapids. We did some fishing and waited there for everyone to go on ahead of us, but the big raft was a long way behind. I think they stayed at their first camp and did some shooting, not fishing. Plus a lot of drinking. They told us all to fuck-off and leave them alone anyway. I decided it was good for them to follow us and maybe help me get out if I lost the canoe in the rapids. We were doing fine, enjoying our *bonding experience*." He paused and smirked at Helen. "Pete was very co-operative, annoying as usual, but he helped set up for the overnight camps and he helped pack up and load the canoe when we were ready to run the rapids. He was going to put on his helmet and lifejacket too, but I whacked him with the axe while he was getting into the canoe. I hit him just once, probably killed him right away, but he was going to drown in the rapids anyway. I rolled him into the bottom of the canoe and finished moving out of the campsite, then I pushed off and pulled into the river. I wore my helmet and life jacket going into the rapids before I flipped us over, so I had an easy float out to the bottom and then swam to the side. I waited for Pete to pop up somewhere after he fell out of the canoe. I was hoping to fake a heroic rescue attempt if anybody was watching. It never happened. I never saw him again until we found him in the rocks with that bear. After a while, I dragged out the canoe, then I waited overnight for the other guys to come down in their raft and bring me out. They helped me look for Pete for a while, then we decided to come out for help. I was getting pretty hysterical and distressed, so they wanted to get me out."

Helen looked skeptical. "You're a lousy fucking actor. I'm sure they were suspicious."

"Nobody's suspicious. We can go home now and run the company the way you want."

"You are fucking nuts," said Helen. She got off the edge of the bed and went out the door, closing it firmly behind her.

The float plane rose from the surface of Lake Superior above the fishing camp and flew up over the river and the rapids northeast toward Thunder Bay and the flight back to Toronto. Helen turned from the window near the back of

the plane and leaned closer to Robbie. They were far from the other passengers, but she kept her voice low anyway. "You seem to have gotten away with murder, Robbie. But you must be feeling very guilty about killing your brother."

Robbie looked at her and scowled. "We got away with murder," he said. "I'm feeling fine."

"But I'm sure you feel too guilty to accept any of Pete's shares in the company and you probably don't want to keep working for us any longer." Robbie frowned at her, looking confused. Helen continued. "So you'll be signing over all of your shares and any of Pete's that you receive after his death. And you'll be leaving the company right after the funeral. I'll draft the documents for you to sign as soon as we get back to the office."

He sat back in shock. "What the fuck? No. I'm not signing anything like that."

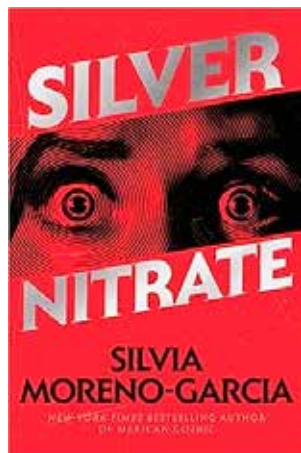
"Oh yes, you are. You're going to do exactly that. Let me explain why." Helene sat back in her seat so Robbie had to turn and face her. She said, "You see, I had my phone recording that little chat we had in your room yesterday. I got your whole confession on how you killed Pete. I've already saved copies in a secure place and I'll leave them there, as long as you sign off on the documents that I give you, exactly as I tell you. Otherwise ... I'll share your confession with the police."

Robbie was looking nervous and agitated again. Trying to keep his voice down, he hissed at her, "You can't do that. The recording will prove you're guilty too! You said you wanted him dead and you told me how to do it."

Helen was shaking her head and through a tight smile she said, "Nope. I'm not that stupid. I was careful to deny everything you said about me asking you to *solve our problem*. I knew nothing about your plan to kill him." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm definitely getting away with murder. You? Maybe not."

An entrepreneur, business advisor, consultant, coach and cheerleader for entrepreneurs, Del Chatterson has written extensively on business topics for decades. He is now writing fiction with his series of Dale Hunter crime novels and a short story collection in progress. Originally from the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, Del has lived and worked for the past forty years in the fascinating French-Canadian city of Montreal, Quebec. Visit delvinchatterson.com.

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS FALL



Silver Nitrate

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Moreno-Garcia crafts an entrancing gothic mystery, skillfully intertwining 1950s Mexican pulp horror cinema with elements of Nazi Occultism, all set against the vibrant backdrop of 1990s Mexico City. Our intriguing trio of characters comprise Montserrat Curiel, a struggling sound editor, faded soap opera star Tristan Abascal, and later, the reclusive cult movie director,

Abel Urueta.

Childhood friends Montserrat, nicknamed “Momo”, and Tristan shared a bond fostered in the Lebanese kitchen of Tristan’s mother in their old neighborhood. Though Momo was petite, plain, and walked with a limp due to a foot injury, she was resilient, unyielding to the local bullies who mocked her. She even stood up for Tristan, who was often bullied for his thick accent. They forged a deep friendship that, despite Momo’s latent romantic feelings, remained platonic.

Tristan grew into a handsome man while Momo, who nurtured a love for horror movies, remained plain but undeniably strong and independent. As Momo grapples with a dwindling career as a sound editor, Tristan, a once-popular soap opera star, makes do with occasional voice-over parts and advertisement gigs.

After a chance meeting over misdirected mail, Tristan and Momo are invited to dinner by Tristan’s new neighbor, famed cult movie director Abel Urueta. Abel shares a tangled tale involving Wilhelm Ewers, a Nazi-Occultist writer who intended to cast a spell with scenes from a film, starring two men and a woman. However, his murder led to an unfinished film and an unfulfilled spell. Abel proposes completing the film by dubbing the last reel with the three of them, intending to lift the curse and bring good fortune to them all.

Moreno-Garcia adeptly intertwines plot threads into a narrative that any horror movie aficionado would relish. This page-turner steadily amplifies the intrigue and tension until it culminates in a thrilling climax. The author effortlessly integrates references to cult horror movies with intricate filmmaking techniques to create an immersive tale of dark arts and occultism.

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



The Senator's Wife

Liv Constantine

D.C. philanthropist Sloane Chase and Senator Whit Montgomery are finally moving on from their partners, who were shot in the same terrible accident. They fall deeply in love, only two years after the tragedy. Sloane and Whit seem like the perfect couple. Sloane trusts Whit, even though she suspects he cheated on his late wife, Peg. And Whit seems to dote on Sloane, knowing she

has lupus and may not live a long life.

When Sloane needs a hip replacement, he promises to bring in a nurse for the entire six weeks she is in recovery. Athena Korras seems to be a dream come true. She has just moved to D.C. from Greece after the death of her husband and comes highly recommended by the agency. Athena has great experience as a home nurse, and also with lupus. She has also agreed to help Sloane with her philanthropic organi-

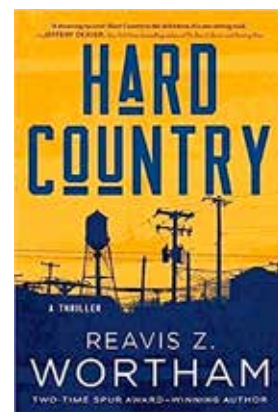
zation, as Whit is too busy with senator duties. Sadly, someone in this trio is not who they claim to be, and things quickly go downhill.

These characters are all independently strong, multi-layered and memorable. This includes Sloane’s former mother-in-law, Rosemary, who is convinced that Whit is up to no good, though she has no evidence.

The plot is fast-paced and exciting, and since all of the narrators are unreliable, readers will never know who is up to no good. Someone is messing with Sloane’s medicine after her hip surgery. Is it Whit? Or is it Athena, who clearly is not who we think she is? All the ingredients for a great plot are here. The last third of the book picks up the pace as readers finally begin to see who is doing what. As usual with this author, there is a huge plot twist that will make readers want to go back and reread the book.

This book is a slow-burn thriller, and all the delicious twists and turns make it hard to put down. And WOW! Readers will not see *that* coming in the last chapter!

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



Hard Country

Reavis Wortham

Plenty of action and suspense, along with fantastic characters and a well-written plot, make this novel a must-read for those who love thrillers. Tucker Snow and his daughter Chloe have recently relocated to Ganther Bluff, Texas, from the Dallas area. Tucker’s wife Sara Beth and their four-year-old daughter Peyton died in a car wreck caused by someone

on drugs.

Tucker and his brother Harley worked as uncover narcotics agents for the Texas Department of Public Safety for decades. However, Tucker had taken his dream job as a special ranger with the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association before the accident. He’s now on leave.

However, Tucker and Chloe’s peace is shattered; first by arguing heard nearby, then by gunshots from two different guns. Tucker goes to the nearby trailer to make sure everyone is okay. This puts him on the radar of Jess Atchley, who doesn’t like any type of law enforcement officer. On top of this, there are cars in and out of the trailer’s driveway day and night. As events escalate, Tucker goes back on active duty and calls Harley for help.

The characterization is well-done in this novel. Tucker is experiencing grief and loss. He is somewhat cautious, at least compared to Harley. Chloe is feeling lost and uprooted. However, she is trying to be understanding of her father’s feelings. The characters brimmed with personality. Readers will look forward to the returning characters’ continued development in the next book in the series.

Many of the antagonists are known early in the book. However, it is the action-packed journey filled with suspense that will keep readers turning the pages. It was a wild ride with sudden moments of danger.

The author also brings a strong sense of place to events. The writing is descriptive without slowing down the vivid and action-filled plot. It’s easy to visualize the town, the people, and the countryside.

Themes include grief, murder, family, corruption, and much more. At the end of the book is an author’s note that should be read. It includes his comment that he stretched legal boundaries in this book to make the story more interesting. There is also a reading group guide and a conversation with the author section.

Overall, this riveting story arc immediately grabbed my attention and kept me engaged throughout the book. This is book one in the Tucker Snow thrillers series. I can’t wait to read the next book. Those who like action-packed crime thrillers will likely enjoy this novel.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Dead and Gone

Joanna Schaffhausen

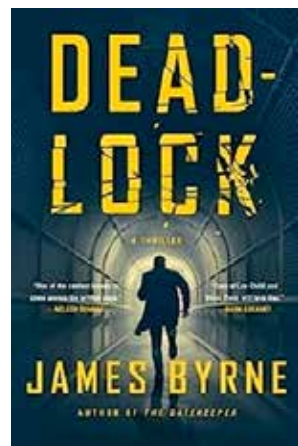
This third book in the Annalisa Vega series proves that each is better than the last. With a tenacious heroine who never gives up, multiple twisted plotlines, an immersive setting, and a whole lot of family drama, *Dead and Gone* is highly engaging and unbelievably atmospheric.

When ex-cop turned private investigator Sam Tran is found hanging from a tree in a cemetery with an ugly message written across his chest, it should be painfully clear he didn’t commit suicide. Chicago Police Detective Annalisa Vega arrives on scene in time to answer the cell phone ringing in the dead man’s pocket, only to be shocked by hearing her brother Vinny Vega’s voice on the other end of the line. She learns Vinny hired Tran to find a dangerous stalker threatening his daughter on her

college campus. The stakes are sky high for Annalisa and her family as they’ll do whatever it takes to keep free-spirited Quinn safe. In an effort to unravel several convoluted cases, Annalisa begins sorting through the dead PI’s open cases while also trying to keep an eye on her niece, who’s not happy about being confined. The more she investigates, the more she believes the cases may be tied together in some way. One thing is clear: PI Sam Tran stumbled upon some information that got him killed and to discover the identity of the killer, Annalisa will have to connect the dots between all his open cases. As it turns out, a twenty-year-old double homicide may hold the key Vega needs.

As always, Schaffhausen’s characters are fully fleshed out and compelling. Readers will easily connect with Annalisa as well as most of the support cast. A multitude of twisted plotlines keeps the tension high and the tone dire as Vega races against time to find a stalker before her niece, who fancies herself an amateur sleuth, gets into something she can’t get out of.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



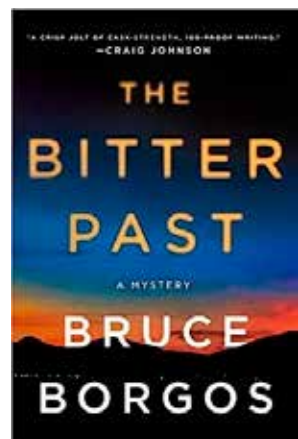
Deadlock

James Byrne

Desmond Aloysius Limerick, aka Dez, is back in another high-octane thriller. Described as “five-eight but built like a tank, with a barrel chest, thick arms and short, bowed legs,” he’s not a traditional James Bond-type lady killer. He’s a very smart, cheeky Brit, covered in scars with a laconic sense of humor and a fine sense of justice.

He’s also an ex-soldier, trained as a “Gatekeeper,” an expert in opening doors (both real and virtual). The prologue shows him on a mission in Chechnya two years before, one that didn’t quite go as planned and would have far-reaching consequences for Dez.

Recently retired, Dez is now in California, getting ready to move on from his last adventure, when he receives a call from his musician friend Raziah Swann in Portland saying she needs his help. Her sister Laleh, a business reporter, has been brutally attacked and only just prevented from being killed when some witnesses happened by. Her apartment has also been ransacked and she has no idea why any of this is



The Bitter Past

Bruce Borgos

Deliberate homicides are rare in Lincoln County, Nevada, so Sheriff Porter Beck and his investigators are shocked to see the mutilated body of retired FBI Agent Ralph Atterbury. Atterbury was skinned and blowtorched, his fingers bent and broken, and most of his teeth pulled out. The killer was clearly looking for something, since Atterbury’s house

was ransacked, with every room tossed, huge holes in the drywall, and papers tossed all over the floor.

The next day, Sheriff Beck is in his office, looking at photos of the crime scene, when a no-nonsense FBI agent named Sana Locke strides in and announces she’s joining the investigation. Despite the grim circumstances, Beck is struck by Sana’s beauty and spunk, and he shamelessly flirts with her as they search for the killer.

Sana reveals that Agent Atterbury was an FBI handler for a Soviet spy back in the cold war era. In the 1950s, a Russian

happening. Laleh has been working on a profile of a recently murdered auditor who was carrying out an audit on local tech company Clockjack Solutions. Started by four academics in the 90s, two of whom have recently died, Clockjack is massively successful with a popular ethos of using their profits for improving the planet and people’s lives.

Taking Raziah to visit Laleh in hospital, Dez spots three thugs set on doing further harm to Laleh and does what he does best to incapacitate them. Now he has attracted the attention of a powerful and corrupt group intent on neutralizing both him and the Swann sisters. It will take all his skills to find out why and keep them all safe.

This sequel to *The Gatekeeper* is another fast-paced thriller that also works well as a standalone. Dez is a one-man army up against an international conspiracy. Applying quirky and sometimes humorous solutions to problems others couldn’t possibly have predicted, Dez leaves a trail of mayhem and havoc behind him. Also, quite often a very high body count, although he only metes out his brand of short, sharp violence as needed. In *Dez*, James Byrne has created a uniquely imagined, larger-than-life action hero who is sure to delight fans of the likes of Jack Reacher, Jason Bourne, and Orphan X. The plot is full of suspense and hugely fun.

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott

KGB agent was sent to the United States to gather intel on the American atomic testing program. At the time, above ground tests of nuclear weapons were being conducted at the Nevada Proving Grounds, north of Las Vegas. Later on, the Russian spy—plagued by a guilty conscience—contacted the FBI and gave them information on the Soviet espionage apparatus in the United States.

Sheriff Beck is well-qualified to oversee this investigation because he was in the Army for twenty years, some of it as a Foreign Area Officer assigned to Russia. Thus Beck speaks Russian and knows quite a bit about the KGB and its successors, who coordinate the training and planting of Russian spies in the United States.

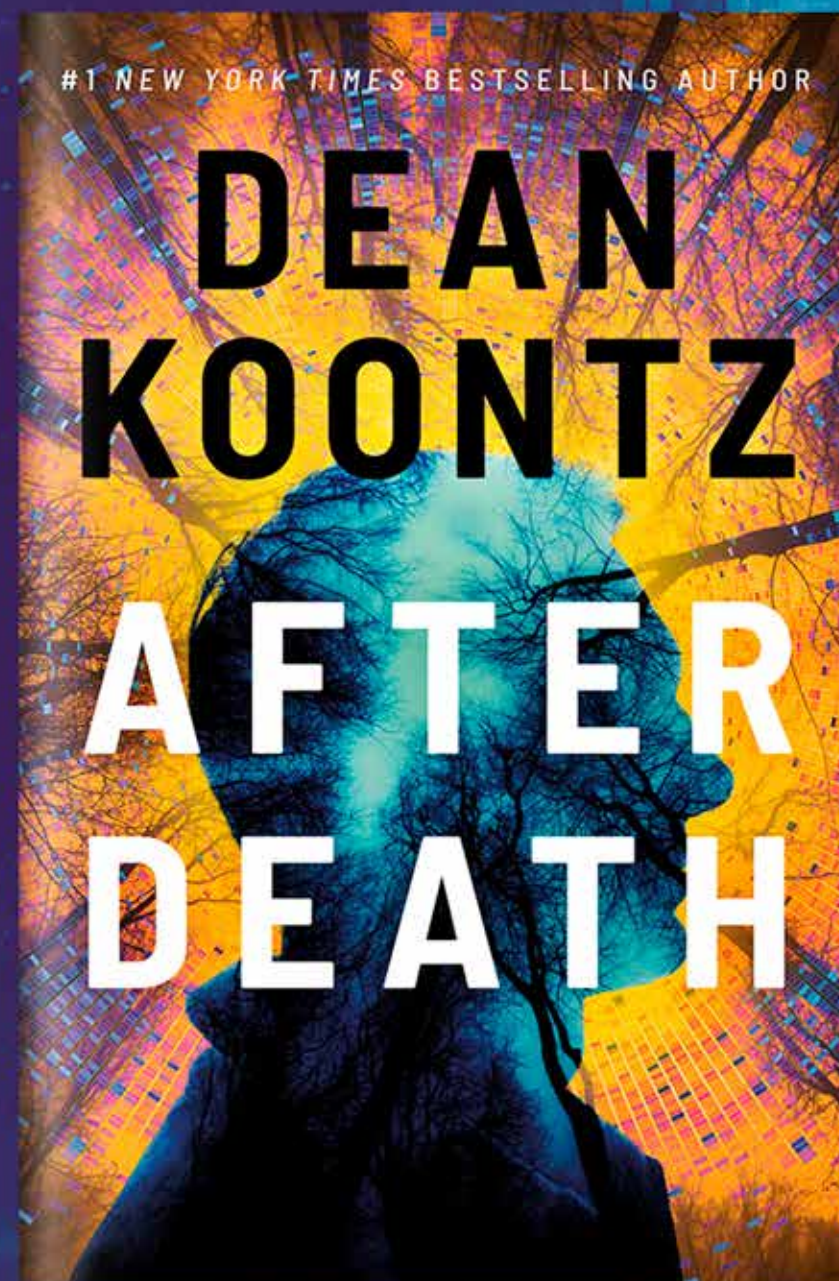
The book contains a smorgasbord of interesting characters, including Tuffy Scruggs—Beck’s best investigator, who looks more like Dick Butkus than Dick Tracey; Wardell Spann—a former police chief, who resents being Beck’s second-in-command; Jimmy and Johnny Green—identical twin deputies, nicknamed the Jolly Greens; and more.

This series debut is a well-crafted police procedural combined with an espionage thriller. Readers will look forward to the further exploits of Sheriff Beck and his crew.

Reviewed by Barbara Saffer

“America’s most popular suspense novelist.”

— Rolling Stone



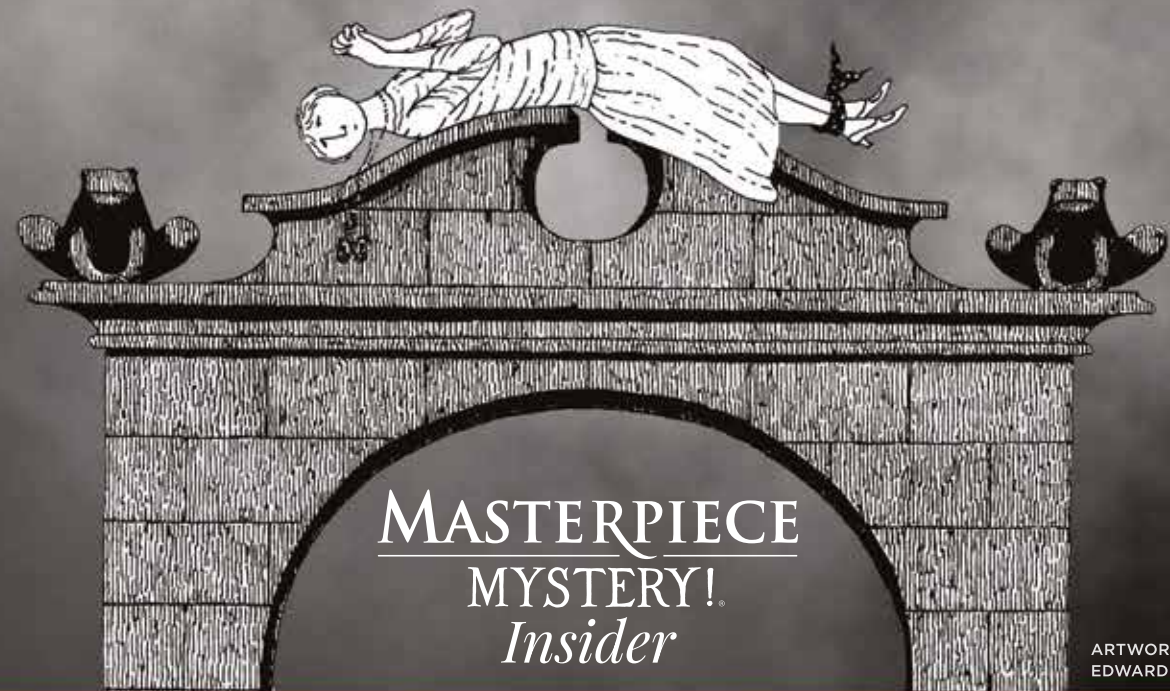
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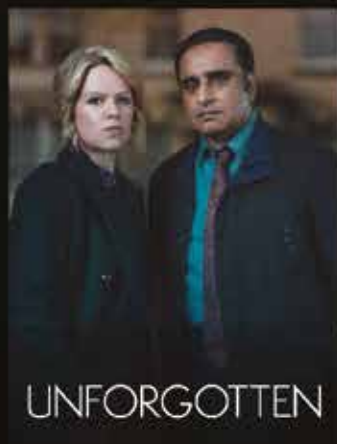




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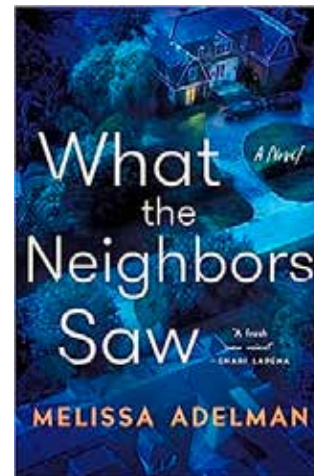
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What the Neighbors Saw

Melissa Adelman

In this domestic thriller, an ambitious young couple succumbs to the lure of all the glitz and glamour of living in an upscale neighborhood alongside the wealthy. When the chance to buy a broken-down Cape Cod cottage at a deal presents itself, they jump at the chance knowing it's a fixer upper, but location is everything, right?

They settle in and begin meeting their wealthy neighbors and attending block parties while starting renovations on their bottomless money pit of a house. Funds are tight, but Sam is expected to make partner at his law firm soon, and Alexis is preparing for the new baby. Just when it seems they are finally on the right track, a murder shatters their perfect illusions. A neighbor is found dead of suspicious causes. How does that happen in the middle of suburbia paradise?

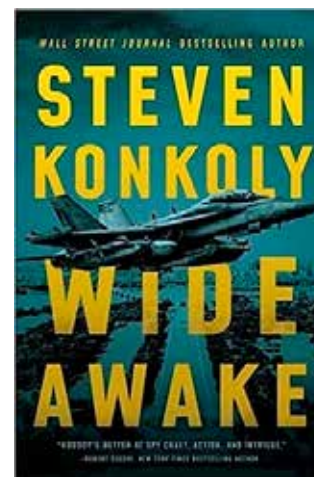
This slow burn unfolds through dual points of view—that of Alexis and also Blair, an influential neighbor who appears to take Alexis under her wing, guiding her through the long

list of who's who, including who's cheating on whom within the not nearly so perfect neighborhood. Before long, it's clear money cannot buy happiness, and after the birth of her child, Alexis tries to conceal her growing uneasiness that's fueled by spying on neighbors. Eventually, the sleepless nights take a toll on her sanity. Dark secrets begin surfacing and masks slipping amid a hunt for the killer living among them.

The first half of the book pays great attention to individual family dynamics as she draws aside the curtains to reveal some ugly truths to readers. The author emphasizes that wealth does not buy happiness or loyalty, changing location does not assure bliss, and the grass is not always greener elsewhere. While most characters are certainly not very likeable, they do afford readers juicy entertainment as the gossip mill runs rampant and lies and secrets pile up. With the pace increasing in the latter half of the book, questions about loyalties and betrayals arise, and many will be shocked at the big reveal and climax.

What The Neighbors Saw is a warning about the many dangers in trying to keep up with the Jones, of trying to fit in at all costs. Fans of domestic thrillers will enjoy this one as will fans of suspense thrillers.

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



Wide Awake

Steven Konkoly

Steven Konkoly brings together diverse characters and an alarming scenario like few authors can. In this third book in the Devin Gray series, Devin and Marnie Young are trying to return to a normal life after taking out a sleeper network. However, violence and a potential for another sleeper network has them back at work. A plan to start a civil war in the United

States is underway. Threats and violence escalate. Who is behind it and can it be stopped?

As always, this author brings characters to life, especially Devin and Marnie. They're intelligent, patriotic, self-confident, strong, and bold. However, they also have some shortcomings that readers find as the story progresses and their natures and backstories become known to readers. It was also great to visit with old friends from the Black Flagged series.

From Washington DC to multiple U.S. states to a foreign country, this novel will keep readers captivated from the first

page to its astonishing conclusion. Konkoly is an outstanding storyteller who keeps readers on the edge of their seats with gripping scenes, action, a superb plot, and fantastic writing. His military background brings an authenticity to his thrillers. He does a great job of balancing the shocking action scenes against the intrigue of the conspiracy plot and the planning of countermeasures. The dynamic plot came alive and felt all too possible with real-world issues incorporated into the story highlighting the societal and political differences between individuals and countries.

Plenty of suspense, a constant sense of urgency, a state of disquietude, and lots of action combined with great characters and a well-written plot make this novel a must-read for those who enjoy thrillers. Themes include conspiracy, violence, differing political and social ideologies, duty, leadership, organization, and coordination.

Overall, this was a gripping, gritty, and chilling story with complex characters, recommended for readers who enjoy political and military thrillers. This book works well as a standalone novel. However, the background and relationship dynamics are best fully understood by reading earlier novels in the series.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



The Last One

Will Dean

Wow! This one is guaranteed to knock your socks off! It's essential to go into this locked room thriller knowing as little as possible.

Caroline Ripley, Caz to her friends, has agreed to go on a transatlantic cruise from Southampton to New York with her boyfriend, Pete Davenport. She has some trepidation about the cruise as it's her first time over-

seas and she normally likes to stay close to home and her family. However, she loves Pete, and even though it's still early days in their relationship, she thinks he might just be the one for her, finally someone she feels she can fully trust who makes her happy.

The ship they're boarding is a state-of-the-art cruise liner, the *RMS Atlantica*, with every luxury you can imagine. Caz and Pete wine and dine and enjoy their first night together in their luxurious suite. However, when Caz wakes the next morning, Pete has gone. Expecting to catch up with him at

breakfast she heads out to the dining room. But something isn't right. It's eerily quiet and all the cabin doors are open and the rooms are empty. Frantically searching the ship, she finds the same on each deck. The ship is still sailing with no land in sight, so where is everyone? How could they all have disappeared during the night and left her alone? The truth will turn out to be even more horrifying than anything she could possibly imagine.

If the COVID pandemic made you think twice about going on an ocean cruise, then this may turn you off the idea forever. What follows is nightmarish, as Caz is thrown from one ordeal into the next and stretched to the limit in her desperation to survive.

The dark, creepy plot is certainly cleverly imagined and will keep you on the edge of your seat as the tension mounts. Yes, it feels beyond belief, but in a very entertaining way and not totally implausible given the dark underbelly of today's world. The novel will quickly hook you and keep you invested in finding out how it ends. It's both terrifying and gripping with jaw-dropping twists you won't see coming. And that final ending, you will either love or hate—what audacity, Will Dean!

Reviewed by Carolyn Scott



Beneath Dark Waters

Karen Rose

Suspense, danger, action, intense moments, and romance are combined to provide a fabulous read in this second book in the New Orleans romantic suspense series that is also partly a police procedural and a private investigator crime novel. If you like contemporary romances with lots of suspense and danger, then this book is one to

check out. Except for the epilogue, the book takes place over the course of five days.

Assistant District Attorney Kaj Cardozo has only lived in New Orleans for six months, but he is known in both New York and in his new home city for his fight against corruption. He's also working a high-profile celebrity assault case that is getting publicity across the country. When his son Elijah becomes the target of a kidnapping attempt, Kaj hires Broussard Investigations to protect Elijah. Val Sorensen is the person assigned to be his bodyguard and the firm is hired to investigate the incident. The investigation reveals more than they bargained for, as drugs, corruption, and murder are discovered.

Kaj, Val, and Elijah are likeable characters. Kaj is kind, understanding, and determined to help his boss root out corruption in the area. However, he also fears for his son's safety. Val is a Marine veteran, tenderhearted, capable, and thoughtful. However, she is also estranged from her sister Sylvie. Elijah is ten years old, smart for his age, and kindhearted.

The prologue will immediately grab readers' attention, and the story continues with action, investigation by both the police and the private investigation firm, and plenty of twists and turns. The book is descriptive without slowing the pace, which is fast. Readers will get an excellent sense of the bayou.

This riveting crime thriller, police procedural, and romantic suspense novel pulls readers into the lives of the characters. The plot is full of chasing down leads and interviewing people, as well as plenty of danger for those involved. The author provides unpredictable moments and a little humor, which offset some gruesome spots in this tale. Themes include murder, abduction, friendship, trust, and much more.

Overall, this briskly paced novel was engaging and atmospheric with great characterization. I can't wait to find out who will be featured in the next book. I recommend this to readers who like romantic suspense novels with relatable and likeable main characters.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn

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