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Incorporating Writing Issue 3 Volume 2

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1. Editorial

"Probably every writer wants to think that they're an individual, with an original furrow to plough"

What do you do for a living?

Editorial by Chaz Brenchley

When people asked at parties what I did, I used to say I was a typist. That was back in the old days, though, near enough thirty years ago, when we did still use typewriters. These days I'm more honest, necessarily, because 'data entry operative' would be just too dull for words. So when I'm asked, I admit to being a writer. The next question, always, is "What do you write?" Novels, I say; novels and short stories. And then again there's the inevitable follow-up question, "What sort of novels?" and I find myself confessing once more that I live down the dirty end of genre. Crime, horror, fantasy, I say. And no longer bother to assert that genre fiction has as much (or, yes, as little) literary merit as any other form of writing, because they won't hear that. They're thinking Christie, King and Tolkien; they think they've got me taped.

As it happens, they're wrong on all three counts. People have said of my work - with some justification - that my crime fiction borders on horror, my horror fiction is really a kind of dark fantasy, and my fantasy is as opaque and mysterious as any crime novel. All of this - of course! - is deliberate. The other thing that happens at parties, my arms fly around all ungainly as I describe a triangle with crime, horror and fantasy at its angles, and myself camped out somewhere in that desolate margin between. The hinterland, I say. It's my natural home.

Probably every writer wants to think that they're an individual, with an original furrow to plough. Even once we get past the romantic-loner image (if we ever do, if we ever see the need), the creative impulse is almost always solitary; you want to find a territory that no one else has touched, and stake it out entirely for yourself. Which can be unfortunate - or at least uncommercial - in the contemporary publishing business, where everybody wants the same as last week, the same as the other guy, safe sales and no risks, no innovation.

See? I told you. Romantic loner, riding his hobby-horse out into the wilderness alone. But my point is that I'm not as alone as I used to be. Genre boundaries are breaking down. What tops the mainstream crime lists in the UK these days is serial-killer thrillers, by and large; and hooray for that, but the distinction between the best of those and genuine psychological (as opposed to supernatural) horror is a shaving off a fraction of a doubt. When I was first approached about guest-editing this issue, the word was that they wanted it to focus on crime and fantasy, as though those were two distinct genres; and so they are, except that I have friends who write crime stories set in a fantasy environment, and friends

who write fantasies in the guise of crime fiction. Where does Jasper Fforde belong? Hodder publishes him as mainstream, which is what I'd do too, if only to avoid the issue. But they do the same with David Mitchell, to give him the literary credibility he needs to win the kudos and awards that he deserves; and I would claim his most successful book, 'Cloud Atlas', absolutely for science fiction (which in my lexicon is a subdivision of fantasy - you see how complicated these questions get?).

So no division is absolute; there is always leakage, and there is always blurring. Nevertheless, genre writers are becoming more militant in support of what they do. Ian Rankin has recently been asserting the literary qualities of crime fiction (and the prejudice of those judges who ignore it, come prizegiving time); meanwhile, numbers of us have formed small promotional groups to take our own message ('to promote our own books' would be a crude way to put it, as we spend much of the time promoting the genre in general) directly to the public. I think it's interesting to observe that a founder member of the first such group, Murder Squad www.murdersquad.co.uk, is also a founder member of the first such fantasy group, The Write Fantastic www.thewritefantastic.com. It would be, ah, invidious to name him.

But the point is this, that I am a passionate advocate of genre fiction on its own terms, as I have been a passionate reader of it all my life; and at the same time I will go to the wall for the proposition that there is nothing that so-called literary fiction has, that genre fiction lacks or needs to lack. I seem to be building the walls up with one hand, while I knock them down with the other. So what is it that I'm saying - vive la différence or plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? Either way, I seem to be speaking a whole nother language, which is the last defence of the romantic loner; but happily, of course, I am perfectly capable of believing two entirely contradictory things at the same time. That's inherent; I'm a novelist, and you have to believe both sides of every argument, or how could your characters fight about it?

2. Interviews

"You learn very quickly that no matter what shitstorm is whirling through your own life, you have to put it to one side and get the bloody story written"

From One Corner to Another: Interview with Val McDermid
Interview by Chaz Brenchley

Val McDermid grew up in a Scottish mining community, then read English at Oxford. She was a journalist for 16 years, starting out in the south-west on local papers and radio stations. She was a news reporter on the Scottish Daily Record and worked freelance for Gay News. Journalism then took her to Manchester, to The People. From 1988 until 1991 she was Northern Bureau Chief. Her first foray into the world of crime fiction was with the publication of Report for Murder in 1987. Since then she has risen to become one of our most successful novelists; she has won the CWA Gold Dagger and the Grand Prix des Romans D'Aventure, and her books are international bestsellers. A major ITV series [based on her books](#) began in 2002, to great acclaim, with Robson Green playing the lead role; the fourth series is due for transmission in early 2006. She has also written a non-fiction book, [A Suitable Job for a Woman: Inside the World of Female Private Eyes](#). Val McDermid divides her time between Cheshire and the Northumberland coast.

You were a journalist before you were a novelist. I know you ended up in a senior position on a Sunday tabloid, but I don't know what kind of reporter

you were before that, and I'm curious to find out if there's any connective tissue between what you did then and what you do now. There's a well-established path from policeman or lawyer to crime writer, as there is from hacker to SF; can you trace the same kind of route from journalism to crime? And if not, what was it that brought you as a writer into genre fiction in general, and crime in particular?

"There are bits of connective tissue between then and now but perhaps not what one would expect. I never did much crime reporting, but I did do bits and pieces of investigative journalism, whose tricks and skills were more or less directly transferable to the Lindsay Gordon and [Kate Brannigan](#) novels. Because I did most of my work on a Sunday paper, I was used to working alone -- Sunday journalism isn't like the daily version, where hacks hunt in packs. On a Sunday, you're always looking for exclusives -- it's a bit of a disaster if you're working on a story and you come across one of the opposition. So being a full-time writer was less of a huge shift than it would have been if I'd been working in a daily newsroom. I think working on a tabloid also teaches verbal economy. When you're always trying to tell a story in ten paragraphs, you learn to make every word earn its keep. I don't think it's any coincidence that my books almost always get longer between first draft and finished version -- I've stripped back so hard that I've ended up leaving stuff out that needs to be there. Journalism also took me into worlds I'd never otherwise have seen. Even though many of those exposures were nasty, brutish and short, they still gave me bare bones material to work with. The one key lesson I learned from journalism was not to be precious about writing. News happens when it happens, not when you feel like writing about it. You learn very quickly that no matter what shitstorm is whirling through your own life, you have to put it to one side and get the bloody story written ahead of deadline or you are worthless to your newsdesk. It might not be the best piece of writing you've ever done, but with something on paper, you have the possibility of making it better. So I don't feel I need to wait for the muse to strike; writing is my job, I should be able to write something no matter how messed up everything else is. And generally, that's how it works. I may be struggling with the novel I'm supposed to be writing, but I will generally be getting on with something else, something less visible, maybe, but nevertheless, something that needs to be done. I think journalism, particularly tabloid journalism, does exert a pull towards genre because you're always working within the constraints of your own particular publication. Or, if you're a freelance, developing the skill to write for several different ones. So you do become accustomed to working within a certain framework of expectation. Thankfully as a novelist, you get to break the rules of narrative a lot more than you ever do as a journalist. For me, crime fiction was the magnet because it was the single genre I read most of and so I felt most confident within its confines. And thankfully I started working there at a time when the walls of its conventions were beginning to be regularly breached. (I like to think of myself as a kind of tartan trebuchet...)"

The crime genre contains numerous subdivisions: the amateur investigator, the professional private eye, the serial-killer thriller. In the course of twenty books over twenty years, you've covered all of those and more. Do you see that as a natural progression, an inherent part of the job, that a writer should inquire into different aspects of her territory? Or do the different categories demand different skills, are they such different processes - perhaps with different readerships? - that effectively they are separate territories?

"It's certainly not a natural progression to stagger from one corner of the genre to another. With most crime writers, you pretty much know what sort of thing you're going to get. Readers like it that way and so do publishers. It makes branding a writer so much easier for the poor souls.

Me, I have a problem with homogeneity. I get bored very easily and I need the stimulus of different environments in which to place my stories. I'm also very story-driven, and I generally know quite early on whether a story that is clamouring in my head is the next novel in a series or a standalone. The difference in process is most marked between series and standalones. With a series novel, I'm working with a nexus of known characters who bring their baggage with them -- their capabilities and their weaknesses are known and to some degree this constrains how the story can unfold. But with a standalone I am initially entirely plot-driven. I know roughly where the story is going and I know certain crucial points in the story. What I need to figure out then is how the person who acts as they have to at those key stages got to be the person who would behave thus. In both types of novel, a sort of biofeedback develops -- the more I know about the characters, the more possible it is to figure out the story possibilities, which in turn tells me more about who these people are, etc. It's just that they start the loop in different places.

And yes, the readers... Some love everything. Some love Kate, some love Lindsay, some love Tony & Carol, some love the standalones; some love the dark and some the light. For every one who demands a new Kate Brannigan, there's another who can't bear her. Makes it hard to build a predictable sales pattern, but that's not the main reason I do this."

Similarly, there are two clear approaches towards a career in crime writing: a series of novels about the same characters, or alternatively a sequence of books that each stand independently. You do both; there are three obvious series in your work, and an increasing number of stand-alones. Is there an identifiable distinction in the original impulse -- when you get a new idea for a novel, do you know straight off if it's a Lindsay Gordon or a Tony Hill or a stand-alone? And are the techniques or the narrative voice, is the creative process so different that it would be impossible to change your mind?

"Pretty much, and yes. I don't know why it comes out that way, but it does. A story demands to be told. My job is to figure out how best to tell that story. Whose story it is. Where it starts. What structure will underpin it. And sometimes that corresponds to the framework of one of the series. And sometimes not. When I first had the idea for *The Mermaids Singing*, for example, I knew right away that it couldn't be a Lindsay or a Kate because, among other reasons, journalists don't catch serial killers and the private eye first person style could not tell this story."

Most writers start with short stories, and move on to novels as they acquire the skills and confidence to tackle wider themes and greater length. You've done that in reverse, only recently publishing your first collection of short work. Is it still a case of skills and confidence, or were there other reasons that held you back from the short story -- and if so, what's changed to bring you to it now?

"For a long time, I couldn't seem to get my head round the short story. I enjoyed reading them, I knew which ones I admired and which ones left me scratching my head. What I couldn't figure out was what a short story idea was. In the early part of my career, several potential short stories ended up as sub-plots in the Kate Brannigan novels, which have always been sub-plot greedy. I did write a few short stories early on but I was never entirely pleased with them, despite one being shortlisted for the CWA short story dagger. Then something seemed to shift inside my head. It felt a bit like Professor Higgins exclaiming, 'By Jove, I think she's got it!' And they started to come, clear in my head, shaped as short stories. I love the chance they give me to experiment with voices I wouldn't necessarily want to engage with at novel length. And that I can shift out of genre when the mood takes me."

Is the crime genre broad enough to hold your interest indefinitely, or are

you keen to reach beyond its borders, to try your hand at something new? Other writers have found popular success and critical acclaim as much a constraint as a support, demanding more of the same when they're impatient for novelty; some have even been driven to bite the hand that fed them. So are you comfortable, or frustrated - and if you would like to write in a different genre, what would that be? Any ideas, any temptations...?

"I think I'm pretty comfortable where I am; not in the sense of complacency but in the sense of being comfortable with the idea that the clamouring ideas revolve around dead bodies. Because I've established myself as someone who does shift about a bit, I've earned the licence to write pretty much what I want. I've always written the books that shouted in my head, and thus far they've always ended up in the genre. Though I do wonder whether, if I'd published *A Place of Execution* under a pseudonym, whether it would have been regarded as a crime novel... And I do have an idea for a novel which is about art and responsibility, where nobody dies until the last chapter... We'll just have to wait and see. It's as much of an adventure for me as it is for my readers."

"I use all the techniques of shamanic dreaming and then on top of that do everything every writer does"

Boudica and Beyond: Interview with Manda Scott
Interview by Chaz Brenchley

Manda Scott qualified as a veterinary surgeon from Glasgow University and spent fifteen years in East Anglia working variously as a surgeon, equine neonatologist and anaesthetist before she turned to writing as an alternative, less sleep-deprived profession.

In the beginning, she wrote contemporary crime thrillers. The first, '[Hen's Teeth](#)', was shortlisted for the Orange prize, the third, '[Stronger than Death](#)', was awarded an Arts Council of England prize for Literature and her fourth, '[No Good Deed](#)', was nominated for a prestigious Edgar Award in 2003.

Since then she has published the four novels of the Boudica series, exploring the life and times of the Eцени war-leader who led the revolt against Rome in 61 AD.

When not writing she is a rock-climber, dressage-rider and apprentice dreamer. She lives in Shropshire with her partner and Inca, the lurcher who began the Boudica series by killing a lactating hare.

Your first book, '*Hen's Teeth*', was also the first avowedly genre novel to be shortlisted for the Orange Prize; it may still be the only one. On the back of that, you built a successful career as a crime novelist - and then jumped tracks into a wholly different genre, perhaps a cross-genre sequence. Can you describe first what took you into crime, and then what was the impulse that led to the Boudica novels? And are you finished with crime now, or do you want to run two parallel careers? Or more?

"I fell into crime by accident, *Hen's Teeth* was a response to a competition run by Virago which they later cancelled. I was shortlisted for that and although there was some fairly drastic editing between the first draft and the final, it still fell into the crime category. I was gutted - I knew nothing about genres except that they seemed to be ghettos and I didn't want to fall into one. I am older and wiser now, clearly."

The move sideways into historical fiction was entirely led by the dreaming which the Boudica books describe. I had always planned to write her life story, just that it was always going to be when I was 'a good enough

writer' which was always, obviously, going to be at least 10 years away. Then a number of things came together and it was clear that it was the time to write Boudica. It was never going to be easy to step sideways into a new area, but I had a fantastically supportive editor and some equally supportive friends who made the transition possible.

"Now that the Boudica series is over, I'm writing a contemporary thriller and then will head back to history in some form or another. My ideal would be to alternate between the two fields, tho' frankly I think they both overlap. And then, yes, there are always other careers. I still do acupuncture, I teach shamanic dreaming, my partner and I are setting up a small business sourcing raw fleece from rare breed sheep and processing it for feltmakers and spinners. And we'll have some sheep, so if I'm desperate, I'll be a shepherd, which could be rather fun."

When we first talked about the Boudica project, you spoke of it as a fantasy series, and I believe it's marketed that way in the States. In this country, it's sold as historical fiction. I've teased readers' groups with this question, and find them fairly evenly divided. Essentially, it's history - but the magic works. Were you ever troubled by this, or is it simply a problem for the marketing people rather than a creative issue? And can you talk about the creative process, especially in relation to the society of the tribes? The Romans left researchable records, but the Iron Age Britons were pre-literate, so there are no reliable sources; it's history, but you had to make half of it up...

"This is marketing; the magic is real for me but if someone else wants to see it as fantasy, that's entirely up to them - conversely, my dreaming courses are full of people who don't, in which case the Boudica books are both a vision of who we might have been and of who we might yet be. The creative drive for these books grew entirely out of the dreaming and a great deal of it is simply a product of my own dreaming - but then I think that applies to all writers, it's just that I choose to define it that way when other people refer to their 'muse' or 'the process'. So I use all the techniques of shamanic dreaming and then on top of that do everything every writer does - which is to find out whatever there is about the subject and then forget most of it and let the small shards that remain act as hooks for the narrative. Everything has to be led by the characters or we create dead, wooden prose. The research for this began in the library, but I spent a week in a round house in Wales and visited experimental archaeologists, both of which told me more than any amount of reading. The logistics were also a case of basic reasoning - the archaeologists can argue for years (and do) about whether the Roman invasion fleet of AD 43 landed in Kent or Sussex, but when you're writing about it, you have to make it happen and the first thing that becomes apparent is that nobody is going to try to land 40,000 men, their equipment, horses, servants, groom, technicians and weapons (so total, say 60,000 people, plus animals, at max of 100 per boat) in the same place on the same day - it's not logistically possible. So then the much-argued theory has to be thrown away and replaced by something that will actually work - namely that they landed at both sites, if not more...All of which means that the 'making up' is based on a mix of research of what is written, what has been found, what can be done now that could be done then and basic, solid logic. And then add imagination, which is what brings it to life and stops it being simply a historical documentary. The dreaming is based entirely on my own experience and is very much a template of what I believe is possible. We are not so different from who we were 2,000 years ago and we have 40,000 - 50,000 years of spiritual evolution all taking us towards shamanic dreaming as the epitome of human endeavour. It's only very recently in human history that we've abandoned that."

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0593048806/incwriters-21/026-1674247-5385262?%5Fencoding=UTF8&camp=1634&link%5Fcode=xm2>

The fourth and final volume in the Boudica series, '[Dreaming the Serpent](#)

Spear', has just been published. For your readers, this is the end of a wracking emotional journey; is it the same for you, or is there a necessary sense of professional detachment throughout the writing process? Or alternatively a sense of disengagement through the editing, proofreading, publicity processes that publication demands? And speaking of endings, how did you approach the apparent problem of the historical novelist, that all your readers believe they know how your story ends? Especially in this case, where what we know is that Boudica Does Not Win?

"I can't do professional detachment - the last book was an extraordinary experience - but then they all were: if I don't feel moved by what I write, I can hardly expect the readers to be and with this kind of work, if it doesn't touch people at a core level, then there's no point. The editing, proofing and publicity are all after the event and create their own detachment - particularly the latter; the publishing cycle is such that one is writing the next book at the time the previous one comes out and so by then there's a degree of distance, particularly now when I'm writing a different era and different characters. As far as endings go - we all know that Boudica doesn't win, but we don't know what happens to the other characters. I didn't know it when I began and that's what kept me going - also, I didn't know what was going to happen to her at the end until I got there - so there are questions to be answered, and emotional investment in the outcome, which is what makes a thriller thrilling (as opposed to the sterile puzzle of a mystery). And there will be more. I have been sowing threads of a (very different) Arthurian series since book I - writing that will let me (and so you) find out how the descendants of the characters fare at the end of the Roman Occupation. Before that, I think we'll see some of the survivors in a thriller set about 10 years after the Revolt."

Sounds wonderful, I can't wait. Manda Scott, thank you very much...

3. Articles

"For a new writer, the path to publication remains difficult - as it should. 'Good' is not the starting point for possible publication, in general. 'Wonderful' is"

Genre Publishing

Article by John Jarrold

I first worked full-time in publishing in the late 1980s, when I ran the Orbit imprint at a company that was then called Macdonald Futura, and owned by Robert Maxwell. Today it's called Time Warner, which has just been acquired, internationally, by Hachette, the French mega-publishers who also own Hodder Headline and Orion, and are themselves owned by an even larger mega-corp. Thus does publishing change.

There were ten SF and Fantasy publishers in UK publishing in the late 80s. There are now five, with a sixth about to appear when Headline launch a small list in the near future. This is partially a function of conglomerates, which have become so prevalent in publishing over the past decade, and also because various managing directors and chief executives have decided that they don't like the genre. I was told a story a couple of weeks ago: one very commercially-minded MD closed down the SF list in the company they ran because there was no one but the editor there who was keen on the genre. For this, the phrase 'crying shame' is too weak and bland.

SF and Fantasy makes up a little under ten percent of paperback fiction sold in the UK. It's commercially successful and among publishers where there is a long-term belief in and understanding of the genre, no one questions its place at the top table. However, the genre still suffers from the Star Trek effect. Many highly-placed publishers don't feel relaxed

about being involved in that strange stuff, where everyone has pointy ears and green skin (sic) - some seem to feel that it is a stain on their company's credentials, much akin to 'erotic' publishing. This is rather depressing to those of us who are involved in and love SF and Fantasy.

Upon a time, I might at this point have invoked the mighty name of [Terry Pratchett](#). But now, although Terry is still a great bestseller, we can talk about other authors who have (yes) transcended the genre, in terms of sales and recognition. Not just [J K Rowling](#), but also [Philip Pullman](#). Not just [China Miéville](#) (who presents an Arts programme on BBC Radio 3, for heaven's sake), but also [Jasper Fforde](#). Jasper is an interesting case. His publishers, Hodder & Stoughton, were once a major player in publishing SF and Fantasy. Now they have only two on-going genre series and Jasper is resolutely published as a mainstream author. Well, to use [Margaret Atwood](#)'s yardstick, there are no squids in spaceships in Jasper's fiction, so obviously it isn't SF. Oh deary, deary me...

So, how do I find myself feeling after almost twenty years involved in genre publishing, seven days a week? Actually, I feel optimistic. Despite the best efforts of some short-sighted senior publishers, the genre is strong, and reaches a larger, wider audience than ever before. In terms of both SF and Fantasy (which are different genres as far as the bookselling trade's head offices are concerned), British authors have moved the goalposts in recent years. In fact, much (but not all) of the most interesting and involving writing in both is coming from the UK.

For a new writer, the path to publication remains difficult - as it should. 'Good' is not the starting point for possible publication, in general. 'Wonderful' is. A genre editor will have to persuade their senior editorial, sales, marketing, publicity and other colleagues that an author is an outstanding writer, a great storyteller and totally commercially viable. Without those three bullet points, it isn't even worth taking an author's work to a publishing meeting - over ninety-five percent of typescripts are turned down by a single editor without anyone else in the company taking a look. I know this, because I did it for fifteen years in three different companies - and because I've had it confirmed by friends and rivals from other publishers. But from Ken McLeod to China Miéville, from Jon Courtenay Grimwood to Alastair Reynolds, the cream rises. And now, as an agent, I'm on the other side of that equation between publisher and author. At least I know the truth - and what publishers need. Even more to the point: what they don't need.

Interesting times...

"By then I had developed a coherent world, drawing on my general knowledge and books at hand to paint a satisfactorily detailed picture of the places where the stories had taken my characters, from barren arctic islands to a barbarous tropical warlord's realm"

But Don't You Just Make It All Up?
 Article by Juliet McKenna

People can be quite surprised when I mention doing research as a fantasy writer. Until I explain how imagined worlds and peoples have to be solidly based in reality. Places and characters have to be believable and accessible. There must be points of contact for the reader, a degree of recognition, of familiarity. Because only then will they suspend their disbelief to follow the writer into the truly fantastic. Because the more at home the reader is in this invented world, the more effectively the writer can engender wonder, excitement, terror and triumph through the magic and the monsters, to make the story really come alive.

This issue of research steered me towards writing fantasy in the first place, rather than crime or historical fiction, two other genres that I love. I'd heard so many crime writers telling cautionary tales about the importance of getting the details right, not only those key to the crime but even the incidentals. I was at home with two small children and ten years ago, before Internet access, checking Which?'s best buy in household appliances was a major task. I couldn't see me establishing some crucial forensic fact or timing a vital connection on the Underground. Not encumbered by the babysling and the pushchair.

As for historical fiction, I wasn't about to touch that. My degree's in Greek and Latin history and literature. I had spent long hours in Oxford libraries trying to disentangle the ten theories that any six historians and commentators could present to explain a single incident. Fiction or not, I couldn't contemplate writing anything dealing with real historical events or people and not applying the same intellectual rigour in the search for that possibly mythical notion, 'the truth'. Again, the Bodleian wouldn't have welcomed me and my encumbrances.

But fantasy doesn't have to be correct in the same way as a historical essay does. It has to be historically plausible, and rigorously consistent in its internal logic. I didn't need to leave the house to achieve that. I had my college textbooks and various history books I'd acquired over the years, together with reasonably clear recollection of historical documentaries. I also had a fair few National Geographic magazines, something I've read since childhood when my Grandpa introduced me to it. I reckoned all that would give me sufficient resources for constructing a plausible background for a heroic fantasy. So I began writing [The Thief's Gamble](#). I was right, up to a point. Up to the end of [The Swordsman's Oath](#), my second book, as it turned out.

By then I had developed a coherent world, drawing on my general knowledge and books at hand to paint a satisfactorily detailed picture of the places where the stories had taken my characters, from barren arctic islands to a barbarous tropical warlord's realm. Now things changed. The next story would take characters and readers to still more new places on my map. If I began repeating myself, it would be painfully evident that I was running out of inspiration. Everyone would become very bored, not least myself.

Other issues emerged. These new places were harsher uplands, quite different to the farming villages and coastal cities in previous books. I also wanted to introduce new characters, to give people good reasons for travelling, to meet and to exchange information crucial to the plot. So I began to wonder what places like Dartmoor and Yorkshire were like in pre-industrial times. I recalled that medieval minstrels and similar were well-travelled, and that fairs were major events where people met and mingled. I drew up the outline of the book and that showed me the gaps in my knowledge. Now I needed to plug them. This pattern has repeated itself with all my subsequent books. I plan out the story and sketch in the background. Then I go in search of the detail I need to bring that background and those characters to life.

This research isn't like undergraduate study. I did buy some scholarly tomes when I was writing [The Gambler's Fortune](#), such as a history of The English Fair and another on medieval travel. I have found The History Guild book club a useful source of such academic yet accessible books with each successive project, and often the cheapest way to buy them. I glance through the review section of the weekend paper, seeing what new non-fiction books are around. These days, in the couple of months when I'm doing my advance thinking and note-making before I start writing, I'll quite often spot a book relevant to some aspect of the new story I'm

working on. I also make notes of books that might come in handy for some idea still waiting its turn.

That book on fairs gave me some splendid detail to create a wholly believable opening for *The Gambler's Fortune*. Borrowing an authoritative history of music from a friend. I read the bits about minstrels and late-medieval music and made notes of the things that I needed to know for my story. I don't have to become any kind of expert, so reading a couple of good books on a topic is generally sufficient. After all, I'm not going to be sitting an exam.

I soon began to realise how useful local sources of history were going to be to me. On a family holiday in Devon, I picked up a slim paperback from a local press on the history of the Dartmoor tin industry in a Tourist Information office. A year or so later, I was on a business trip to Aberdeen where I bought a handful of books on Orkney, the Highlands and Islands and the medieval Kingdom of the Isles that gave a solid basis to [The Assassin's Edge](#). These days, whenever we visit churches, castles and stately homes, most bookstalls provide another inexpensive pamphlet or quirky local history. I stockpile these things now, against the day when I'll need them and as a general resource to prompt ideas and subplots. Friends contributed to research from the very beginning of my writing career. People are simply intrigued when they find out you're a writer and love to help. A friend of a friend supplied both a book and a cassette tape of folksongs dating back to the English Civil War when he heard I was wondering what kind of thing the minstrel in my story would be singing. A pal's mother who's variously taught cooking/domestic science/home economics/food technology for the past 40 years recommended Dorothy Hartley's [Food in England](#) as a general reference, together with Reay Tannahill's *Food in History*. That's an excellent example of the kind of wide ranging, thematic history books that have become popular in recent years. These are extremely useful, not merely for adding depth and texture to the work in hand. I find any book spanning centuries and cultures offers facts and anecdotes that spark new, unexpected ideas.

Such books also often supply the technical details about lost skills or practises that one must still get correct. Popular science books also assist, as do television programmes, from Ray Mears' [Bushcraft series](#) to documentaries on reconstructive archaeology. Otherwise, I risk a polite email from someone who knows more than me. I don't have to know more than them; I just have to make sure I'm correct in the key detail that I'm using. It's a mistake not to bother about such things because less than one person in a thousand might know better. That one person has had their enjoyment spoiled, because once the suspension of disbelief has snapped, it can't really be fully repaired. The rest of the readers may not know or even care whether I'm right or wrong but the correct information will still heighten their sense of reality.

I soon learned to think laterally. Since *The Assassin's Edge* was set in arctic latitudes, I read the Lonely Planet and Rough Guides to the Faroes, Greenland and Iceland. These offered practical information on climate and geography, fauna and flora as well as yet more useful historical detail. I did the same when I started *The Aldabreshin Compass* series, turning to guides to Indonesia and Fiji. I also purchased the entire back catalogue of National Geographic magazine on CD-ROM. It's fully searchable and the articles from remote places before the advent of mass tourism are fascinating. Its other contribution is invaluable visual references through its photographs, especially from the earliest decades.

Artwork is another vital visual resource. I find working from pictures of costume, places, buildings and people is an excellent way to find the unique and memorable detail that makes things so much more real for the

reader, avoiding the vagueness of a generic FantasyLand. I collect postcards from galleries and museums, particularly of interesting faces. Looking at those, I steer clear of any hint of Crimewatch photo-fits in my descriptions, particularly minor characters. Visiting the bookshelves in gallery and museum shops I find yet more useful, unusual books that will offer something to enhance the gloss of verisimilitude.

These are frequently biography and autobiography. Writing a fantasy novel isn't merely world-building. The story must be about living, breathing characters, who are generally living very different lives to men and women today. Reading about historical figures, especially if their own words make a contribution is an excellent way into my own characters' voices and viewpoints. I can find the connections that enable modern readers to empathise with them as well as the differences in attitude and belief that will make my characters challenging and distinct. While I loathe reality TV as a rule, occasionally I find that those series putting hapless volunteers into a historical setting can provide valuable insights.

Lateral thinking comes into play here too. Would-be authors are told to write about what they know. Personally I've never been a female captain of medieval mercenaries or been on a nerve-wracking hunt for a dragon through a tropical jungle. However, reading Linda Greenlaw's autobiography, [The Hungry Ocean](#), about her life as the female fishing-boat captain in the harsh, masculine world of the North Atlantic swordfisheries gave me essential insights for the former. David Attenborough's books about his Zoo Quest trips to Madagascar and Borneo were splendid inspiration for the latter. The Attenborough books are long out of print but the Internet can usually supply such things.

I've found time and again it pays to keep my eyes open and equally, an open mind. But I also have to know when to stop. I've said one or two well-researched books will generally supply sufficient detail for a story. As I also mentioned, I'm not going to be sitting an exam. I have to remember that neither are my readers. There are times when I've read one, two or even three books on some aspect of a book or a series and have had to curb an impulse to read three more. When I'm writing, whenever I'm tempted to detour for three pages into the fascinating intricacies of travel by horse, mule or carriage, I recall those Science Fiction books that I've read where the story goes into suspended animation while I'm told everything I never wanted to know about air-recycling in spaceships.

However fascinating I find some aspect of medieval life or a foreign culture, it's only there to serve the story. Detail must be used with a light touch or it becomes burdensome. While absence of research will inevitably betray itself, the bulk of a fantasy author's background reading should remain unseen, like an iceberg nine-tenths submerged.

"Meanwhile, as comics become more realistic, film has been learning to show things that have no physical existence."

Why is there such a synergy between comics and fantasy?
 Article by Jean Rogers

Our Kindly Editor asks, "Why is there such a synergy between comics and fantasy?", and my mind immediately rushes off in two directions. On the one hand, it's because this, and this, and that... And on the other, this is a misapprehension, there is no particular bond between the two.

Let's clear that second one out of the way first. The high-profile face of comics is the superhero: BAM! - KERPOW! It's another X-Men movie! And

superheroes are clearly fantasy - or science fiction, whichever you please, the distinction is fortunately not relevant to this discussion. But despite their visibility, superheroes are only one of the things that comics do. It's an odd paradox that in literature, realism constitutes the mainstream, and fantasy is a genre, relegated to marginal status; in comics, science fiction and superheroics are widely regarded as mainstream, while realistic topics are seen as experimental, avant-garde.

Yet even in the US, the publishers of Superman were already established as "Detective Comics" (DC) when Siegel and Shuster had their brainwave. The nearest the Francophone tradition comes to an indigenous superhero is a wily little Gaul with a supply of magic potion. Japanese manga cover every type of narrative imaginable (some of them, admittedly, involving some very odd fantasies). Even in the UK, the (somewhat heightened) realism of Roy of the Rovers and The Bash Street Kids is as central to our understanding of comics as the outright fantastic.

There is, in other words, more to comics than musclemen in lycra. Nonetheless, there was something about Superman: this new kind of hero was made for comics, and he had powers that a comic could convey better than any other medium (with radio the second-best option). He could run faster than a speeding bullet, and leap tall buildings at a single bound - not very realistic achievements, but then the comics themselves were not very realistic. It soon became obvious that the audience did not dislike this lack of realism - on the contrary! The comics gained confidence, and Superman started to fly - followed by a flock of imitators.

You'll believe a man can fly was the tag line of the 1978 Superman movie. But it wasn't the film that made flight believable: for all the special effects, Christopher Reeve in flight looked static, like a man holding a pose against a moving backdrop. It was the original comics - and this is before the wonders of modern colour printing, in the days of four brash primary colours, coarsely screened, and often mis-registered on the line artwork - yet even in these comics it was possible to look at a drawing of a man, which was by its nature static, holding a pose, and believe that a man could fly.

The comics medium was unrealistic at so many levels that the reader did half the work: *credo quia impossibile*, willingly suspending disbelief as the price of admission to the story. Recent advances in print technology, not to mention a shift to higher, and more expensive, production standards, have opened up new possibilities for comics, with subtler colouring, and more realistic images. But it is noticeable that a photorealistic comics artist like Alex Ross (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex_Ross) is more at home with static portraits and cover art than with the frame by frame movement of narrative. Powers, by current favourite Brian Michael Bendis, combines the brightly coloured world of costumed and super-powered heroes and villains, and combines it with a dark and cynical cop show - but this apparently realistic setting is conveyed in Michael Avon Oeming's exaggeratedly cartoony artwork.

Meanwhile, as comics become more realistic, film has been learning to show things that have no physical existence. Within the last ten years, computer graphics have finally developed to a quality that allows film to do what comics have been doing all along. At last, Spiderman can swing on his webbing from skyscraper to skyscraper across the city, at last flight begins to look like movement. But film is expensive, and labour-intensive CGI makes it more so. In a recent interview about his film script for Beowulf, Neil Gaiman told The Hollywood Reporter's Gina McIntyre, "There was one scene that I started writing, and I phoned Bob Zemeckis and said, 'We're working on this scene, and we're worried it might be too expensive,

this whole dragon battle.' Bob just said, 'There's nothing you and Roger Avary could possibly write that will cost me more than \$1 million a minute to shoot.' "

Comics can get the same effects on a much lower budget: Gaiman may have worried about filming a battle between dragons, but he did not blink at asking Miguelanxo Prado to draw him a palace that hung in space like a planet, "a palace, huge, yes, and vaster than [she] had dreamed a single place could be, and beautiful as any jewel, its towers burning like diamonds in the darkness of space." If you want to work on a planetary scale, to pit your hero against a galactic devourer of worlds, comics are your medium of choice.

Size isn't everything. Comics are also the ideal medium for portraying non-human protagonists. If your characters are aliens from space, fairies or elves (however you may choose to characterise, or indeed spell, them) or animals, telling your story on film will involve painstaking computer effects, and telling it in conventional prose will involve finding ways to remind the reader that these characters are not human. Which is not to say that this can't be done, simply that comics offer the advantage that you can simply draw them that way. Want to parody Conan the Barbarian by writing an epic fantasy whose hero is an aardvark? It worked for Dave Sim, over 300 instalments and twenty-nine years of Cerebus. Or perhaps a quest fantasy whose heroine just happens to be a wombat (Ursula Vernon's Digger: <http://www.graphicmash.com/series.php?name=digger>)? Even a heap of sentient pondweed can star in his own, critically acclaimed comic (Swamp Thing).

Even here, the comics medium blurs the distinction between fantasy and realism. A narrative in which animals are anthropomorphised, in which rabbits or soft toys behave to a greater or lesser degree like human beings, is by definition a fantasy. Yet this narrative device is so widely and uncritically accepted that art spiegelman was able to fold it back on itself, and use it to scrutinise a reality which it would be unbearable to depict literally. His Maus tells of his father's experiences in Auschwitz, and their continuing effects through his life, as a tale of cats and mice.

One of the most unrealistic aspects of conventional superhero comics is in fact their depiction of a world like our own in all details except that of the existence of these super-powered beings: as if this were a minor change, which would create no ripples. This aspect of the genre is one of those tested to destruction twenty years ago by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons in Watchmen. The existence of the atomically powered Doctor Manhattan has altered the balance of the power in the world, modified international politics and enabled the development of alternative energy sources: his influence is visible on every street, in the electric powered cars and the Gunga Diner chain of fast food outlets. In a world where superheroes exist, kids read comics about pirates. Everywhere you look, some detail tells you this world is both like and unlike ours: down to the 58 varieties proclaimed on the Heinz bean tin.

This is another advantage of comics as a medium for the world-builder: not only are the most extravagant effects cheap and, if not easy, at least no more difficult than workaday realism, all necessary information can be conveyed to the reader inconspicuously. There is no need for infodumps, no need for the character's viewpoint to be compromised in order to point out to the reader something which the character would take for granted. As with any speculative fiction, there is an art in passing to the attentive reader information needed to follow the story. Comics provide a second form in which details may convey something about the world, about the character, about the plot.

Reading comics is a skill, in other words, like reading any text. People who don't read comics tend to assume that the pictures are there to break up the words, to make the act of reading more palatable to unpractised readers (because, of course, comics are for kids). If this were true, wordless comics would be easier to follow than the text-heavy ones; which is not the case. Part of the skill of the storyteller is to deploy words and images to the best advantage, which means that each should do a different part of the work. There is no room for duplication in this most economical of narrative forms, which Peter Dickinson compared to "trying to write Paradise Lost in haiku" (A Defence of Rubbish, <http://www.peterdickinson.com/DefenseOfRubbish.html>).

There is a pleasure for the reader in scrutinising each panel for the last fragment of information, verbal or pictorial. Speculative fiction, a genre in which nothing can be taken for granted, nothing assumed about the world, offers the maximum scope for this exercise. Bryan Talbot's *Heart of Empire* takes place in an alternative London; an early image shows Her Majesty's Skyship Titanic bringing visitors from New Amsterdam into the centre of the city, landing at Kings Cross International Airway Station on a platform resembling the base of the Eiffel Tower. This triumph of nineteenth century engineering dominates a scene full of keys to the narrative, introducing a society in which the self-confidence of Victorian Britain has been preserved by a triumphant monarchy. The results are both exhilarating - the technical wizardry, the exuberant decoration (not to mention Angus McKie's radiant colours) - and repressive - the social conservatism implicit in the costumes and the tiny detail of the Union Flag flying above the landing platform.

Such images are not purely decorative; which is not to say that they are not decorative at all. Sheer visual pleasure is part of the appeal of comics, and for those who enjoy fantasy there is a specific pleasure in seeing the fantastic made visible. Fantasy art plus fantasy narrative: how could it not be a winning combination?

"Of course the quality of translation varies. How easy can it be to find a native English speaker who's fluent in Icelandic?"

Bloody Foreigners
 Article by Ann Cleeves

Translated crime fiction from Europe has hit the headlines recently because last year's Gold Dagger shortlist of six featured four Euro-crime novels. There were protests from British and American writers and publishers and now the rules have been changed. Did the Dagger judges have a collective moment of contrary madness? Surely Euro-crime can't really be that good?

Well yes, I think it is. I would have quibbled about some of the chosen titles. Reading is subjective. We're not all going to agree about a favourite book. But the best translated crime fiction is subtle, witty and very, very classy.

Why do I enjoy it so much? Because it gives a privileged glimpse of other people's lives. It has the same delicious voyeurism of walking down a street at dusk, looking into rooms where lights have been switched on, but curtains still not drawn. It's the tiny details of every day life which fascinate and bring a country to life for us. By reading another culture's popular fiction we understand its preoccupations. Also, I love to travel and I don't have an unlimited budget. So, reading about Athens, Finland or Iceland, satisfies the wanderlust at least for a while.

These books are so important to me that I feel I should remember how I first came across them, in the same way as I remember first meeting my husband. I read [Simenon](#) as a child. The Maigret books were my comfort reading when I was a student. And there was [Henning Mankell](#) of course. But somehow these authors don't count. They're too popular and there's none of the excitement of discovery.

While I can't remember who first recommended the new wave of Euro-crime writers to me, I do remember the book which started the addiction. [THE DEPTHS OF THE FOREST](#) by Eugenio Fuentes. An Arcadia trade paperback with a blue/green jacket more evocative of water than the trees it's supposed to represent. It's set in a nature reserve - Extramadura I know now - so comfortable territory for me. A young woman is murdered while she's hiking through the forest. There are a limited number of suspects: her lover, an artist with whom she had an affair, the reserve warden, an elderly woman who once owned the land. It sounds almost like a British Golden Age murder mystery, but this is much more sophisticated. Although Cupido, the central character, is a classic loner private eye, there are hints of an intriguing back story which will, I hope, be revealed in future novels. The character of the victim is revealed subtly. There's one scene of a stag being killed, which indicates a real and unsentimental understanding of the countryside.

Of course the quality of translation varies. How easy can it be to find a native English speaker who's fluent in Icelandic? In fact Indridason, who won last year's Gold Dagger, is very well served by his translator. And for an example of terrific translation try [THE LATE-NIGHT NEWS](#) by Petros Makaris. David Connolly, who brought CID chief Costas Haritos wonderfully to life in colloquial English, has won awards for his work. The general rule is that the translator should write into his first language. The importance of this is illustrated by the dreadful translation of Kjersti Scheen's [FINAL CURTAIN](#). The translator was a German who lived in Ireland, and his idiosyncratic phrasing spoiled the books for lots of readers. Not entirely for me though. I still enjoyed it. Lively characters and an interesting plot survived the mangled dialogue. There's very little Euro-crime that I don't like at all.

And I'm not alone. Last year I managed InterCrime, an Arts Council-sponsored project to promote translated crime to reading groups in Kirklees and East Riding. The idea was to use the readers' comments to encourage other people to try the books. We invited the groups - and anyone else who wanted to come along - to the Harrogate Crime-Writing Festival to discuss their favourite authors. Eighty people turned up! More than most bookshops and libraries would expect for an event with a big name author.

Because we're reading more crime novels in translation, publishers are now touring their authors more. Every year since the Harrogate Festival started, it has featured a panel of European and Scandinavian writers. There I first met Makaris, [Leif Davidsen](#), a Danish writer who has more in common with Le Carré than traditional crime writers, and another short-listed Gold Dagger author, Norwegian Karin Fossum. The Russian, [Boris Akunin](#), will be at Left Coast Crime in Bristol in March.

Now, a group of independent publishers has come together to bring three more Europeans to meet readers. On April 6th, in the Lit and Phil Library in Newcastle, I'm chairing a panel that features Dominique Manotti from France, Gianrico Carofiglio from Italy and Finn Matti Joensuu. [ROUGH TRADE](#) Manotti's first book is edgy and disturbing. Her central character, detective Daquin, is a gay man, who has a credible, if uncomfortably manipulative relationship with a Turkish informer. Set in the recent past, this is the Paris of race riots, exploitation and corrupt cops, not the city loved by tourists. Her new novel [DEAD HORSEMEAT](#) is set at the end of

the eighties and has a stunning opening. Carofiglio's first novel [INVOLUNTARY WITNESS](#) was published to great acclaim last year. He was a judge in Mafia trials and his central character is a lawyer. Like ROUGH TRADE this is a book about immigration, intolerance and alienation. I've never read Joensuu, but I love Scandinavian books. He's a serving policeman so I'm expecting a pacy police procedural. The proof of his novel [THE PRIEST OF EVIL](#) has just arrived and I can't wait to begin.

Translated crime is my reading passion. Give it a try. You might be converted too.

"Even when authors are brave (or foolish) enough to fight back by killing off their detectives, pressure to allow a resurrection may prove irresistible"

Series or stand-alone?
 Article by Martin Edwards

No genre lends itself better to the writing of a series than crime fiction. Anyone who doubts this need only consider the celebrity of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Philip Marlowe, Inspector Morse and the lasting fame of their creators. For half a century, series formed the core of the Collins Crime Club and Victor Gollancz's yellow-jacketed list and books about the likes of Dalgleish, Dalziel & Pascoe and Rebus continue to attract readers in vast numbers. Oddly, many of the authors of the most famous detective series - such as Ruth Rendell's Kingsmarkham Chronicles - did not set out to write books about the same character for many years. But once a character seizes the popular imagination, it is difficult to let him or her go.

Even when authors are brave (or foolish) enough to fight back by killing off their detectives, pressure to allow a resurrection may prove irresistible - think of Holmes' escape from the Reichenbach Falls. To this day, some writers of series become bored with their creations, although their solutions to the problem can be disastrous. In *A Long Silence*, Nicolas Freeling disposed of Inspector Piet van der Valk, but his second string detective, Castang, never caught on and Freeling resorted to bringing van der Valk's widow Arlette to the centre of the stage, without ever recapturing the panache of his early books. Most writers who lose their enthusiasm for a series detective simply allow the character to fade out of sight, so that he or she can be recalled to duty should circumstances (or a new publishing contract) so require.

A series can become a strait-jacket for the novelist. Perhaps this is why, although non-series crime novels have been around almost since the beginning of the genre (it was inaugurated by Edgar Allan Poe, creator of the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, the first series sleuth), they have become more prominent in recent years. The success of writers such as Minette Walters, whose books lack a recurrent protagonist, has prompted a shift in approach by many authors on both sides of the Atlantic. Collins Crime Club and the Gollancz crime imprint have disappeared as, it seems, the number of readers (especially library readers) who seek the cosy familiarity of the traditional series diminishes.

Although series crime fiction is still alive and well, the way in which writers treat series characters has changed with the years. Holmes, Poirot, Marple and Nero Wolfe did not 'grow' to any meaningful extent as time passed. When Dorothy L Sayers tried to transform Lord Peter Wimsey from a Woosterish amateur sleuth to a sensitive and sophisticated lover, she ran into problems of plausibility and was even accused - unfairly, to my mind - of 'falling in love' with her hero. In the end, like Conan Doyle, she

became frustrated with the limitations of her series character, although rather than attempting to drown him, she gave him a wife and three young children - which so far as his detective work was concerned had much the same effect.

Keeping a long-term series fresh in the current market usually means that the author must devote care to developing not merely the central character but also the supporting cast. Several writers have done this brilliantly. If one considers the first novels in the major series by P.D. James, Rendell and Reginald Hill, one is bound to conclude that, although they were rich in promise, they were far removed in quality and depth from later works featuring the same detectives. As the author's confidence and range grows, so nowadays do most of the main characters in the series. The series can have many of the qualities (preferably the more attractive ones) of a television soap opera, but it can also do more. Take for instance the way in which the American Lawrence Sanders charts Matt Scudder's battle with alcoholism. Similarly, Amanda Cross utilised her books about Kate Fansler to provide, as *The Oxford Companion to Crime & Mystery Writing* put it, 'a polemic on feminism'. One of the most startling series projects was that devised and implemented by the Swedish couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo. Their 10-book series about Superintendent Martin Beck was originally planned as a 300-chapter 'analytic portrait of Sweden's experiment in social democracy...a coherent ideological (leftist) indictment of social justice in contemporary Sweden' as *The Oxford Companion* puts it. Such an approach to writing a series seems cold-blooded, but the result was a collection of unexpectedly varied and entertaining police novels. The sheer ambition of Sjöwall and Wahloo means that their work overshadows even a writer as capable as Henning Mankell, one of the hottest writers of 'Eurocrime' on the circuit today and author of a series about Inspector Kurt Wallander that has echoes of the Beck project.

Commercially, crime series have much to offer authors, readers and publishers alike. So the theory goes, loyalty to a detective character, like loyalty to any consumer-orientated brand, will build over time. Readers are, rightly or wrongly, often inclined to prefer the tried-and-tested to the unknown. So why should any writer with an established series want to risk a stand-alone?

The reason may be artistic. An author may have an irresistible idea that simply does not fit in with the series. I found this when the concept for the book that eventually became *Take My Breath Away* first seduced me. It was obvious from the outset that the storyline was incompatible with my books featuring Liverpool solicitor Harry Devlin. Although the idea concerned mysterious deaths in a law firm, the setting was London and there needed to be real uncertainty as to whether the two central characters would survive. One of the limitations of a series novel (with the exception of a few books like *A Long Silence* and the final Poirot novel) is that the reader can be confident that, whatever trials and tribulations the hero or heroine will face, he or she will make it safely through to the next case. Compare that with the unpredictable fate of the sometimes doomed protagonists of Cornell Woolrich's thrillers, dazzling if wayward books which maintained high tension through relentless manipulation of the reader's emotions.

Some of the more prolific writers find that switching from a series to a non-series novel can help to keep the series fresh. Reginald Hill is an example; until recent years he made a point of never writing two Dalziel & Pascoe books in succession. Or (and this was certainly true in my own case) the writer may just be keen to stretch his talents in ways that the constraints of an existing series do not permit.

Sometimes the change of approach is a one-off. An intriguing example is Peter Robinson's *Caedmon's Song*, published more than a decade ago to little fanfare at a time when his series featuring Inspector Alan Banks was in its early stages. Now the Banks books are bestsellers and, duly republished, *Caedmon's Song* has at last achieved the sales it always deserved. Sometimes the author's change of gear is more permanent. Ann Cleeves created two well-received series, one featuring an elderly pair of amateur sleuths, the other a police inspector, but in recent years she has focused on writing stand-alones, most recently *Raven Black*, which have lifted her reputation to the next level. Likewise, Morag Joss's breakthrough book after three series mysteries was *Half Broken Things*, which deservedly earned a CWA Silver Dagger. Iain Pears' sales shot into a higher league when he stepped away from his series about art dealer Jonathan Argyll and produced *An Instance of the Fingerpost*. And, entertaining as Harlan Coben's books about sports agent Myron Bolitar were, it was only when he turned to writing stand-alones designed to have readers chewing their fingernails that he achieved true bestseller status.

Minette Walters was not, of course, the first writer of stand-alones to achieve fame in the crime field. But the tendency was for the most successful exponents of stand-alones, such as Dick Francis, to focus on thrills and action rather than on the mystery element. Walters made an immediate impact with *The Ice House* and *The Sculptress*; the latter fuses characterisation and complexity of plot superbly and remains perhaps her finest work to date. The combination of critical and popular acclaim which greeted those books tempted editors looking for new talent to focus increasingly on authors offering a comparable blend of psychological suspense with in-depth characterisation. J Wallis Martin, the late Andrea Badenoch and Margaret Murphy are amongst those who have emerged as notable practitioners of this form of crime fiction.

Nevertheless, the attraction of a series to both authors and readers endures and Murphy, for instance, has in recent years moved into writing about two sets of series characters. After writing *Take My Breath Away*, I came up with a very different concept, involving the development over time of a relationship between a historian and a police officer leading a cold case review team. I also wanted to explore a different (and extraordinarily multi-faceted) rural locale and to see what tensions might arise between someone who moves there to 'live the dream' and those who are native to the area - mirroring the larger conflict between urban and rural British life in the twenty first century. Impossible to cover all that ground in a single novel. Thus [The Coffin Trail](#) was, from the start, conceived as the first of a series of Lake District Mysteries.

So perhaps from the writer's perspective, the choice between series and stand-alone is best dictated by the nature of the story concept. Some ideas are best suited to short stories; some are ideal for stand-alones; and some have enough staying power (even if it is not apparent at first) to make a series of novels that attracts an ever-growing readership.

"If only Chandler had enlivened Poodle Springs with a hint of bestiality"

Bestiality, Parthenogenesis and Women's Underwear: Love and Sex In Mayhem
 Parva And Pulp City
 Article by Andrew Taylor

Crime fiction holds a mirror to the society which produces it. What the mirror reflects these days is lot and lots of sex.

The modern crime writer and reader benefit from a groaning smorgasbord of

sexual activities. But things were not always like this. Sometimes it is instructive to cast our eyes back to earlier, simpler days of the genre.

By and large, the British tended to disapprove of sex among their corpses. Conan Doyle was a married man with children, but Sherlock Holmes left the messy business of marriage (and presumably sex) to Watson, not just once but twice. Irene Adler, last seen dressed as a man, hardly counts as a girlfriend.

Somerset Maugham believed that a love interest had no part in the detective novel, let alone sex. W.H.Auden thought that "In his sexual life, the detective must be either celibate or happily married."

In 1928, Dorothy L Sayers wrote:

"One fettering convention... is that of the 'love interest'. ...As a result, some of the finest detective stories are marred by a conventional love-story, irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in..."

Yet only two years later, the lure of literary love - with more than a hint of sex - had become irresistible: Sayers suffered an apparent change of heart and published *Strong Poison*, the first of four novels which chart the courtship of her monocled sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, a lady who happens to write crime novels for a living.

Here's another, more recent view from Colin Watson, a crime writer who wrote *Snobbery with Violence*, an account of English crime stories and their audience. Incidentally it was he who coined the phrase "Mayhem Parva" to describe the village setting of so many cosy crime novels. He quotes a passage from a pre-war crime writer, Lynn Brock, which shows the exacting role that women had to play in the years between the wars:

"From the tip of her sprucely-waving golden head to the toes of her smartly-sensible shoes, her orderly freshness and daintiness were without blemish - an estate of jealously guarded, minutely vigilant propriety - sweet, sound English womanliness, scrupulously groomed, meticulously decked for the afternoon."

Steamy stuff, indeed. One has only to join the Crime Writers' Association of Great Britain to meet many contemporary examples of sweet, sound English womanliness.

Watson went on to describe a woman's duties on active service:

"...A woman might inspire and, within limits, sustain a hero - perhaps cut a bond or two for him at an opportune moment - but she was barred from violent intervention on his behalf. In return, she enjoyed immunity from vulgar assaults such as kicks, punches and blows on the head. Being locked in cellars, attics and crypts was in order; so was abduction by homicidal maniacs. But no matter how desperate or unprincipled her captors were supposed to be, it was never suggested for a moment that sexual conquest figured among their plans..."

All this suggests that the repressed sex in pre-war British thrillers and crime fiction was characterised by a powerful strain of sado-masochism. To return to Sayers: in *Strong Poison*, the love interest is integral to the crime plot because her heroine is on trial for murder. Readers in the 1930s must have felt that Harriet reeked of sexuality. Like her creator, she has lived with a man outside the bounds of matrimony.

She is also an independent woman, also like her creator, highly

intelligent, with a successful career. Nevertheless, there comes a moment in *Have His Carcase* when she sees Lord Peter in what is to her a new and indubitably sexual light: "...he had not so far produced in her that crushing sense of utter inferiority which leads to prostration and hero worship. But now she realised that there was, after all, something god-like about him. He could control a horse."

So Harriet wants to be dominated? And, as well as the masochism, can the modern scholar also detect a tell-tale hint of bestiality?

In fact horses in *Have His Carcase* seem to bring out the worst in Wimsey, and in Sayers. He tells Harriet in one of his more jocular moments, "*You miserable little cockney... Your knowledge of horses is comprised in the rhyme which says, 'I know two things about the horse and one of them is rather coarse.' ...Wretched girl - wait till we are married. You shall fall off a horse every day until you learn to sit on it.*"

More bestiality, of course. Its ghostly footprints - or hoofprints - are everywhere. Perhaps the sexual mores of *Mayhem Parva* were more advanced than modern readers tend to think.

In *Have His Carcase*, we also learn that Harriet can vamp with the best of them, when duty calls. In this case she needs to extract information from a suspected criminal. First she has her hair done in a bunch of black ringlets - long hair was associated with moral laxity. Then she chooses "*a slinky garment...with a corsage which outlined the figure and a skirt which waved tempestuously about her ankles... high-heeled beige shoes and sheer silk stockings, with embroidered gloves and handbag, completed this alluring toilette...*"

She also wears an enormous hat and makes up her face "*with just so much artful restraint as to suggest enormous experience aping an impossible innocence.*"

Her unfortunate victim is so bowled over by this display of rampant sexuality that he parts with the information she wants without getting anything other than visual stimulation in return. When he tries to kiss her, the hat gets in the way, and then she shrieks and gives him a box on the ear.

The victim's misfortunes aren't over. Later he has the temerity to complain in Wimsey's hearing that he's been short-changed, and he's soon taken to task.

"*Manners, please!*" said Wimsey. "*You will kindly refer to Miss Vane in a proper way and spare me the boring nuisance of pushing your teeth out at the back of your neck.*"

No doubt Lord Peter's caveman behaviour was one of the characteristics which attracted Harriet - which woke what she coyly refers to elsewhere as her "shabby tigers". Here we have yet another hint of that recurring bestiality motif.

Where Wimsey and Vane led, others followed. Many other writers allowed love to rear its head among the corpses. Among them were Margery Allingham, Michael Innes and Ngaio Marsh. One by one, their sleuths fell in love and married, though the evidence for sexual attraction is generally scanty, at best. None of the women was portrayed as obviously beautiful, let alone sexy. Despite the apparent absence of sex appeal, these unions were usually blessed with children.

If sex was not allowed, the modern literary scholar can only infer that the consorts of these sleuths practised a biologically innovative form of parthenogenesis at present unknown to medical science.

But change was in the air, wafting across the Atlantic, where hard-boiled writing was beginning to provide an alternative to Mayhem Parva. American pulp crime writing rarely touches on parthenogenesis.

The obvious place to start is at the top, with Dashiell Hammett and *The Thin Man*, published in 1932. His protagonists Nora and Nick Charles are equals; they are several times larger than life and they have an awesome capacity for alcohol. They have something else, too, something which illustrates why love in Mayhem Parva has a different meaning from love in Pulp City.

They obviously, almost blatantly, have a sex life. (Given Nick's intake of alcohol, his continuing potency must in fact rank as a miracle on a par with parthenogenesis.) Interestingly enough, however, there's no evidence of bestiality.

But before the modern reader cheers too loudly, it's worth remembering that like so much Noir crime fiction today, pulp and hard-boiled fiction fifty years ago had its own conventions, which were often as cripplingly formulaic as those of Middle England and Mayhem Parva.

Consider, for example, the rules which the publishers of a magazine called *Spicy Detective* laid down for their contributors on both sides of the Atlantic:

"In describing breasts of a female character, avoid anatomical descriptions. If it is necessary for the story to have the girl give herself to a man, or be taken by him, do not go too carefully into the details... Whenever possible, avoid complete nudity of the female characters. You can have a girl strip down to her underwear, or transparent negligée or night-gown, or the thin torn shreds of her garments, but while the girl is alive and in contact with a man we do not want complete nudity. A nude female corpse is allowable, of course. Also a girl undressing in the privacy of her own room, but when men are in the action try to keep at least a shred of something on the girls. Do not have men in underwear in scenes with women, and no nude men at all. The idea is to have a very strong sex element in these stories without anything that might be interpreted as being vulgar or obscene."

Sex leads to another complication, which the later career of Raymond Chandler neatly exemplifies. The Marlowe books have plenty of glimpses of sexuality, albeit from a viewpoint not a million miles from that of *Spicy Detective*. But Chandler was wary of love. This was the man who wrote: "Love interest almost always weakens a mystery because it introduces a type of suspense that is antagonistic to the detective's struggle to solve a problem."

It's certainly true that *Poodle Springs*, Chandler's last, and unfinished, novel shows the danger a writer of quality can face when sexual love runs away with him and his characters. Linda Loring, the woman with eight million dollars, meets Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*, and proposes to him in *Playback*. In *Poodle Springs* they are married, but the combination of her wealth and his pride seems a recipe for divorce. The bride's present to the groom is one million dollars, which he refuses. He turns down the Cadillac, too.

No wonder Chandler didn't finish *Poodle Springs*. He had two problems to

solve. First, his leading characters were incompatible in almost all areas of marriage. Second, there was an enormous technical challenge: as the protagonist of a crime series Marlowe Married was an entirely different animal from Marlowe Single. Marital sex seems inevitably tame in comparison with the gamier flavours of the illicit or at least novel varieties available to Marlowe in his bachelor days. If only Chandler had enlivened Poodle Springs with a hint of bestiality.

So much for love, sex and crime fiction. What about love, sex and crime writers? Let the facts speak for themselves.

Colonel Christie failed to last the course, though Agatha Christie made a better choice with her second husband. Margery Allingham married a man who in the language of the day seems to have been rather a cad and a sponger, though not an unmitigated one. Mr and Mrs Chandler did not have an idyllic time.

Dorothy L Sayers fell unsuitably in love, had a fling with a motor mechanic, and finally married a man whose main qualification seems to have been that he was the motoring correspondent for The News of the World. (Perhaps she had a penchant for the internal combustion engine, as well as the horse?) Hammett's marriage ended in divorce, though he did sustain a long-term relationship with another writer. Ngaio Marsh and Josephine Tey stayed single.

Out of all these authors, the one who wrote the most perceptively about sex - and in many guises - was Josephine Tey. In one of her last novels, *To Love and Be Wise*, for example, her characters hint at an astonishingly broad range of sexual and emotional behaviour.

Oddly enough, though, Tey doesn't address those central sexual themes in Anglo-American crime fiction - bestiality, parthenogenesis and women's underwear. Only *Incorporating Writing* does that.

"The outsiders are the critics of the Times Literary Supplement who simply do not regard science fiction as worth reviewing"

What we mean and how we are seen
 Article by Farah Mendlesohn

The dismissal of genre fiction is common to most popular literary genres. What may be specific to science fiction is that the critique of the genre most commonly offered by the "non-sf world" bears such little resemblance to the genre as it exists. Or more properly, it resembles only a small sliver of the genre, and frequently the very sliver that the most committed sf readers despise themselves.

Let us first consider who and what the outsiders are and what they think. The outsiders are the critics of the Times Literary Supplement who simply do not regard science fiction as worth reviewing, or The Guardian which accords science fiction novels only thumbnail sketches, or the New York Times which assigns science fiction to reviewers who don't like science fiction and so are primed either to reject the book or, if they do like it (and this is what annoys science fiction fans most) to claim that the book is not science fiction. Many of these critics, lacking appropriate reading strategies, are baffled by the attempts to unbalance and discomfit the reader, bored by the absence of strong inter-personal relationships, and undone by the extended descriptions of a strange world, complicated physics or imaginary engineering. Attempting to deal with this, their eyes are drawn to the flashy, easily identifiable tropes of rocket ship, android, clone. Science fiction becomes pantomime. Its metaphorical structures are

lost.

This article has the potential to turn into an extended whine, an "alas, poor me" attitude to science fiction which the author M John Harrison and the critic Dan Hartland find particularly repellent. Both argue that if science fiction is disparaged it is deservedly so; that science fiction has accumulated a range of bad habits and values that prevent it from ever being considered as literature. If science fiction wants to be taken notice of, it should compete on the terms set by the literary establishment.

There are two ways to consider this. The first is to consider the values of the literary establishment, how they relate to science fiction and the cultural wars that are fought over this. The second is to reconsider whether science fiction is so hegemonic after all.

The Great Divide between science fiction and "literary fiction", as I have argued in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (2003), can be summarised as "what is the character?" This may be an odd way to put it, because in science fiction the answer may well be "the universe" or "the idea". It is not so much that science fiction is idea-driven rather than character-driven—although it is: the story starts from "what if the world were different", not from "who is this person"—but that the direction of gaze is different. If science fiction characters can feel like ciphers it may be because they are intended to function as avatars which the reader can steer through the world. Literary fiction, even when it is written in the first person, prefers to place the reader in front of the proscenium arch watching the reaction of the actor to the drama.

This difference between existing vicariously through the protagonist and watching the protagonist became a literary battleground at the end of the nineteenth century. The critics Roger Luckhurst (for science fiction) and Beverly Lyon Clark (for children's literature) both point to the struggles between the followers of Henry James and those aligned with adventure literature (they refer to H. G. Wells and Mark Twain respectively) to define the modern novel and at the same time, to define "adulthood". In the process many books written for mixed audience—the works of Frances Hodgson Burnett, the writing of Robert Louis Stevenson—fell out of the category of adult fiction. With them fell the literatures of sensation which, while always eyed with suspicion, had in the eighteenth and nineteenth century precisely been regarded as adult fiction, in the sense of "not suitable for children".

What we see from the late nineteenth century onwards is not just a redefinition of suitable reading for adults, but a redefinition of what adulthood, and consequently childhood, means. By the end of the nineteenth century adulthood as depicted in novels was increasingly portrayed as concerned with relationships between people. It says to readers: if you are an adult you will turn away from the world and focus on inward things. Science fiction, which continues to obsess about the macro world, whether in the form of embarrassing space opera from E. E. Doc Smith (a writer of the 1920s) or his more sophisticated descendants such as David Weber and Lois McMaster Bujold, or in the political futures of Ken MacLeod or Gwyneth Jones, is essentially saying "there are more important issues than how you feel about something or someone."

Adulthood as it is conceived at the end of the nineteenth century changes in another important way. Compare the novels of Dickens or Trollope to those of James. Both Dickens and Trollope essentially argue that the world can be changed. James and many modern writers argue that it cannot. That the route to adulthood therefore is through acceptance not through empowerment.

By the 1940s, relationships to things, to politics, to the world were moving down the age-group or becoming sidelined into new genres such as sf and the thriller. There may also be an extent to which they were pathologised (and this may explain the "rise" in Aspergers'-it is not an illness, it is a human trait which no longer fits the cultural environment). As this happened we begin to see a growing gender divide. While men continue to write these emotionally centred novels, their audience became increasingly female. Men, we are told, stopped reading. In the twentieth century we are repeatedly informed, "boys don't read."

Which creates a logical conundrum: because if men don't read, but science fiction doesn't sell to women (female readership has never gone much over one third, if the surveys are to be believed), who is reading it? The answer of course is about social expectation and questionnaire response. If you define reading as reading of a particular kind of text, and the person questioned has been taught that what they are reading "doesn't count", or is childish, they are quite likely to describe themselves as a non-reader.

This problem is continuously reinforced by critics in the mainstream through the way they review: book review after book review comments on "character" and "relationships". There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this. Most of the books they review are written with this reading strategy in mind. But what if the book was written for a different reading strategy?

There are some texts which straddle the line between outside and inside the genre. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveller's Wife* are two such. To the literary world they cannot be science fiction. Neither contains the icons of the field: there are no rocket ships, computers or interstellar space ships. Crucially, each of these books makes extensive use of the first person, and is vitally interested in individual emotional response. Both novels were recognized by sf readers, however: hard not to when the first has some distinctively futuristic scenes and the second involves a genetic disease which triggers time travel. This does not mean, however, that they work entirely well as science fiction: in each case there is an insularity to the characters depicted which means we learn very little about the world. In each case, the characters are pawns of fate. Each accepts what the world is doing to them, they make no choice to engage with the universe. This is not the way science fiction thinks: even at the height of what in sf has been called "British miserablism" (roughly 1950-1980) there was an assumption that the individual will resist the universe or will try to alter it within the bounds of scientific possibility. The fundamentally technocratic attitudes of science fiction to the universe-its kickassness-is defined in this paradigm as childish before any consideration is given to what is being kicked.

What can happen when the values of one genre is imposed on another can be seen in what has happened to science fiction written for children and juveniles. All books written for children have an "intention to socialize". I'm not sure it's possible to write a "neutral book" for children. A consideration of sf books written for the 10-15 age group up to say 1960, by writers such as Robert A Heinlein and Andre Norton, suggests a combination of an "outward bound" spirit with a desire to introduce boys to the world of work, and to return to the point I threw in earlier, an interest in things that might today be classed as Aspergers'. These books were very popular. From the 1960s through to the end of the 1970s, the overarching theme was "the elders were wrong": John Christopher, John Townsend, Sylvia Engdahl wrote novels in which the world was not as it was presented and the job of children was to fix it. Then in the 1990s science fiction for children began to take on board the idea that adventures

outside the home were simply metaphors for emotional growth. That EQ was more important than IQ (see Angela Fuller, *The Guardian*, March 7, '06.) A meeting with an alien was almost always the prerequisite for learning to deal with parents, friends or the school bully. These books, by writers such as Alison Goodman and Jeanne Willis, were not bad novels, but they reflected the values of an establishment that demands children read for emotional growth, not intellectual growth. They weren't science fiction and they didn't sell to readers of science fiction. They were interested in the inner self, not the outside world. The Geek, previously the hero of the science fiction novel, retreated into the background. In D. J. McHale's Pendragon series the nerd stays at home, reading the diaries of the jock having the adventure. In children's literature, the qualities of the sf fan became undesirable in the very fiction written for them.

To return to my earlier point, if sf were to shed its bad habits—and so far I have been unable to identify what it is Hartland and Harrison, bitterly opposed to the idea that sf is distinctive, identify as specifically sf bad habits—I'm not convinced it could ever be accepted into the mainstream as long as the direction of its gaze remain different, and the emotional and cultural values of the readership remain different. When some books are accepted into the mainstream, it may well be for quite different criteria than are lauded by the sf audience.

The thing that may make the difference to the above argument, however, is the growing sense that many younger authors genuinely straddle two worlds: authors like Toby Litt, Audrey Niffenegger and David Mitchell have grown up in a culture in which the sf discourse has become mainstream in computer games, video and film. Sf itself is far less outsider than it once was. Its ideas and tropes are comfortably accepted into discussion so that Niffenegger, while adhering to the literary requirement to focus on the relationship between two individuals was comfortable using a science fictional idea as catalyst.

All of the above implies that there is a single critical discourse in science fiction, but within the sf community itself, the most that could be identified is a sensibility. That outward gaze, that insistence on the individual in response to the world, or a sense that the individual should have an affect on the world manifests very differently in the world of hard-sf (where the engineer and the engineered are king), in cyberpunk and singularity sf where the presence of the Meat is an annoyance, as opposed to the near future alternate worlds where the Americans are only one power among many, or a world in which genetic engineering disrupts the understanding of gender. Arguments about "character" in these contexts may hinge on ideological understandings as to how humans react in certain situations. Emotional plausibility may be replaced by scientific plausibility—a suggested panel item for a science fiction convention this year was "what would a literary novel look like if written according to what we know of sociobiology" (Jo Walton sought to answer this in her fantasy, *Tooth and Claw*). And as scientific understandings of the human are both shifting and hotly contested two novels on the subject might look very different, might even be in argument with each other. The internal discourse of science fiction is itself an element of the genre that outsiders frequently miss.

There are heated debates as to the proper subject matter for science fiction. Science fiction is frequently written in heated debate, in violent response both to the world and to other writers' stories and commentary.* Feminist science fiction has now permeated the field; it began to challenge the "mainstream" discourse in the 1960s with tales by Judith Merrill, Zenna Henderson and Pamela Zoline which turned domestic concerns into science fiction without any of the gee whiz techno-optimism with which men had

approached the topic. Issues of sexuality have fascinated some writers, repelled others. Not because certain types of sex are taboo, but because sex itself—unless suitably reduced to a scientific study—has frequently been considered irrelevant to the real issues in life (that Aspergers' thing again). Furthermore, the boundaries of sf and fantasy are hotly contended. Far from being a genre complacent to itself, sf lies on the faultlines of genre. While there is a frequent defensiveness—Harrison and Hartland are right about that—there is also a sense from many that any victory in the mainstream won on the terms set by the mainstream would be a false victory, The battle—if there is one—is to be accepted as equal and interesting but different, and perhaps to watch writers of literary fictions adopt the techniques of sf.

From the outside science fiction looks like a monolithic tale of spaceships conquering the galaxy or conquering us; of clones taking over our lives and computers our bank accounts. From the inside... well, if you want to know what sf is really about, what subject matter captivates sf audiences, open the pages of your newspaper. For each story in those pages, I could find you a science fiction author who has written a novel or story on that topic.

*M. John Harrison's 2002 novel 'Light' was a response to the New Space Opera which emerged in the late 1980s in response to his own 1975 'Centauri Device' which was itself a response to the space opera being marketed at the time...

4. Columns

"The wiry harmonica strains just as i did and we talked and talked of details and nuances: could we use barrels lashed together and build a platform on top? are the islands large enough to camp on?"

Cubicle Escapee
Column by Sharon Sadle

the actual date of escape, of shoving off, of goodbye-ing my old life was pushed ahead several times while i oscillated between exuberant joy and stunned wonderment at getting rid of almost everything i owned. the final careless tidying up of work projects and dealing with friends that couldn't relate to me throwing in the towel was easy. suburban boredom had broken my will to comply with what anyone but me thought i should be doing. it's been 6 months and looking back over 12000 miles, 17 states, 4000 dollars spent and a world of internal change, i can't believe i waited so long to leave. the path is free form, whichever road looks best at the time and my high (high) mileage car has been more than willing to oblige.

i've met oodles of people, too many to note except by brief description as they fit in no neat categories other than many are younger than me. almost everyone expresses some level of envy and i try to relate that traveling, open ended, is an obtainable goal worth pursuing. in altanta, i met matt, a stoner musician who toured me around his city. we found an abandoned jail and snooped inside. in richmond i met chris and alex, two dudes intent on whiskey and kung fu who offered me a week of accommodations on their couch in exchange for a new car battery. west virginia was comfy in a bed thick with quilts and jeb's mom's sock monkey collection. she cooked hog sausage for breakfast. on and on, random conversation, games of darts, coffee till the wee hours, cards with the kindest and most accommodating strangers. they trusted me, i trusted them and came to wonder how a country filled with such hearty good people could be doing such militaristic ill will world wide. on i traveled to philadelphia (saw the bell but forgot to get a cheese steak), to ohio (camped alongside corn harvesters) and to chicago

where i met tom, a man-cub of 19 that is apparently going to make my longest held dream come true. i'm 35 (and sometimes panic that i'm doing this trip at what is usually such a settling down time of life).

i met tom on line through an urban exploration web site. we exchanged a few emails, nailed down the locations of some abandoned buildings we wanted to photograph and set a date to meet. i picked him up and in the miles between the cities we explored, we chanced to find out that my longest held dream was his current and intent endeavor: floating down the mississippi river, all 2300 or so miles of it, on a raft, tom sawyer style. he pictured the clothes line, the fire pit, the wiry harmonica strains just as i did and we talked and talked of details and nuances: could we use barrels lashed together and build a platform on top? are the islands large enough to camp on? will a barge crush our craft to flotsam? over those few days (while stalking around deteriorating buildings that were visually fabulous, some of the largest and most stunningly desolate i've been in) we cemented a simple plan: buy a boat instead of make one and begin the trip sometime in the spring. it was fun to talk about but my hopes were guarded at best, who actually makes these things happen?

after chicago, weeks and weeks went by. i high tailed it south, looking for warmth, to st. louis, to oklahoma city, through texas with occasional emails and phone calls from tom to refine our plans and restate promises to make the boat trip happen. i stood by, willing and able, but without a lot of confidence. about a month ago, i got an email: he bought a boat, followed shortly after by a deluge of pictures and phone calls to let me hear the motor run. as it stands, i've sent all my extra money to cover part of my half of the purchase price (a bargain at \$2500), i'm working in colorado to pay for the rest and simply waiting for our june 1 departure date. i haven't figured out what to with my car while i'm on the river and i can't say what will happen after our two month long float down or if i'll make it to the bottom, south of new orleans (that's a lot of face time with a near stranger). what i do know for absolute certainty is that come may, i'll be heading north to minnesota, to the very first trickle of the river, to step onto our beat up but sturdy, stained but sea worthy, 24 foot long pontoon boat. we have 430 pounds of soup to pack on board, a gas grill and a brass bell. i don't know where we'll poop or shower, if we'll be able to find someone else to come along or what we'll do if a big storm blows up on us. i do know i'm full of trepidation and exhilaration, of fear of the commitment and fear of passing up this maybe one chance to do this trip which i've wanted to do for as long as i can remember. all systems go.

5. Reviews

RECOMMENDED NOVEL APRIL 2006

[A Feast for Crows](#) by George R. R. Martin (Voyager, ISBN0002247437, 704 pages). In hardback now, paperback due in May

There is a constant question in my mind, over the utility of reviewing middle volumes in a long fantasy sequence. To be sure, a review alerts the reader that the book is now available; but an alert reader will know this already, from half a dozen different sources. To readers familiar with the series, a mid-term review is not useful, because they already know what they think; to unfamiliar readers, it's still not useful, because it discusses characters and situations whereof it necessarily assumes a knowledge that the reader doesn't share.

Nor is it markedly useful to me as reviewer, except to furnish a free copy of the book. If I've reviewed earlier volumes already, then chances are

I've already said all I have to say about the concept, the ambition, the style and the achievement of the series. First impressions have been discussed, and it's too soon for final judgements. There's frankly little I can say, except to talk about the plot. And character development, I suppose, but that's the same thing through the other eye: plot is only what people do, and what they do depends on who they are and how they're changing. Reviews that depend on discussions of plot give away too much to one class of reader and are meaningless to the other, and are dull to write besides.

You can at least try to enthuse new readers, to encourage them to tackle the series - but in that case you're seeking to send them to a different book entirely, the first of the sequence. These sequences are generally not a series of sequels, individual novels that share characters and setting; they tend rather to be a single vast novel published in multiple volumes. Of your kindness, pity the poor reviewer. This is like being asked to review chapters sixty-four through eighty-nine of 'Moby Dick': there is no "Call me Ishmael" and there is no devious-cruising Rachel to find a single missing orphan, neither an opening nor a resolution, only characters we've already met moving towards a fate that's yet to be decided.

So why do it here, now? Because George Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' is a unique sequence, an unparalleled achievement already, four books in to an uncertain number. It is monumentally ambitious, staggeringly complex; and elements of that uniqueness lie in his evolving strategies, the ways that he chooses to handle multiple characters, storylines and timelines. Some of these are only coming clear now, in the mid-volumes of the sequence; some, it is clear, have only been decided or discovered or desperately invented now, at sudden need. Any book shows the hand of its author, but a long book is a process, and - when the pages number in their thousands, when the years of production can be counted in decades - it shows the hand of its author evolving. All good fiction treats with change, but it's a treat to watch it happen to the author's practice in parallel with his text.

In many ways. 'A Song of Ice and Fire' inhabits the classic fantasy milieu, mediaevalism with added magic. We started with a fractious kingdom, divided by greed and ambition, long-held grudges and the memories of recent wars; we had knights, castles, manipulative women and boorish, violent men. We had one family close to the heart of the action, who came swiftly close to the heart of the reader; we had a grim but non-specific, clearly magical threat to the north, beyond the ice-wall, and we had dragons' eggs overseas, waiting to hatch into the hands of the ci-devant royal family. We were on familiar territory, or thought so; we knew where we stood.

But that was two and a half thousand pages before this volume begins, and on the same crude synoptical measure, it's remarkable how little has changed, except that everything is different. The king-in-situ died in volume one, and there have been heirs and claimants and counter-claimants ever since, a raging civil war with all its concomitant deal-making and oathbreaking. The icy threat to the north is looming, but barely manifest yet; the dragons are still overseas, still hatchlings, having their own adventures but not yet troubling us.

Forget the synopsis. No one reads a book by synopsis; you read it page by page, in the order that the author selects. And page by page, this is one of the most gripping, shifting, suspense-filled reads that you will find within or outwith the genre; and yet all of that action, plot, storytelling still derives directly from character. Nothing is sacrificed by way of depth or vision, in any crass attempt to keep the reader entertained.

Someone said once that George Martin had the voice of a poet and a mind

like a steel trap; the good news is that he still does. Every page is a pleasure to read, for its use of language alone: simple, provocative, intelligent writing of the highest order. And beneath every page is the ruthless clear thinking of a man who understands human failings, and insists that to understand all does not imply an obligation to forgive all.

And the whole - concept, story, character, language - builds into something greater even than the sum of its parts. This is the real thing, a work of art in the making, a bridge from one shore to another. But any bridge is liable to sag in the middle, if it lacks physical structures of support. There are particular difficulties inherent in sustaining this kind of multi-volume, multi-character narrative; above all there's the danger of over-complication, of simply trying to juggle too many storylines and too many characters within a space that suddenly becomes too constrictive. I abandoned another epic series that I had once enjoyed, around volume seven, because (a) I had largely forgotten between one volume and the next who was whom and on which side, and it took me a third of the latest book to get caught up; and (b) there were so many storylines running concurrently that none of them had the chance to advance any significant distance, even within the pages of a conspicuously fat book.

Without wanting to sound too fanboy about it, there is simply no danger of (a) with George Martin's books; it's been five years between vols three and four, and every significant character, every situation was still seared into my mind. From invention to expression, the entire compass of his writing carries an intensity, an emotional charge that scalds its mark on the reader. The greater danger is (b), that dreary slow shuffle from book to book, the sensation that great quantities of stuff has happened but actually we're barely further forward. It's one of the problems of scale; when you have half a world to work with and events going on all over, the physical limits of a book are suddenly a real constraint. The stubborn solution is to go on describing everything in the same detail, which results in brick-sized volumes that seem to go nowhere; the craven solution is to scant, to move armies across continents in a paragraph, to have half the action happen offstage and out of sight, to shortchange an expectant reader any way you can get away with.

George Martin takes the stubborn line, but with an original twist. A sequential story is already divided vertically, into separate volumes; when 'A Feast for Crows' threatened to become impossibly vast, he divided it horizontally also. Rather than every storyline taking a pace or two forward, this book focuses on one area of interest, following those related storylines to a logical rest-point and setting the rest aside, to be addressed in the following volume: a book that will run parallel to this one, rather than consecutive. I could have done without his authorial note to explain this, as it seemed to be clear what he was doing, but that's my only grumble. I think it's an interesting approach, that makes for a far more satisfying read.

Martin has a habit of addressing his readership directly, in afterwords; he did the same in the previous volume, 'A Storm of Swords', to explain that the numerous storylines were not necessarily running on exactly the same timeline. Again, this seemed to me superfluous, as the fact of it was obvious, but he was probably responding to complaints.

Another way to keep the narrative flow from becoming clogged by too many characters, of course, is to winnow. George Martin has never been shy of killing off a favourite character, where the story demands it; here - well, the book's title is not an exaggeration. The slaughter-quotient is actually extraordinary. The whole series has carried an edge of darkness, a relentlessness that occasionally makes me yearn for what I call Rivendell-

moments, those chapters where readers and characters both can just relax and enjoy, rest up for the next stretch; this volume outreaches even its predecessors in a kind of grim bloodletting. When both the romantic lead and a major hate-figure are suddenly dead within a couple of chapters of each other, and you're still only midway through the sequence, it demands radical revision of all your assumptions. Gotta love that, when an author surprises his readers absolutely.

In sum, then: this is a remarkable book in a remarkable series. If you've been paying attention to the world of fantasy fiction any time this last ten years, you should know that already. If you haven't - well, don't buy this book yet. Go buy volume one, 'A Game of Thrones' instead. And be amazed. This is fiction on a Shakespearean scale: tragedy and history together, the whole distressful package narrated in a voice that charms, seduces and appals.

Chaz Brenchley

[Moonwise](#) by Greer Gilman (Prime Books www.prime-books.com ISBN0-8095-5061-X, \$29.95)

Greer Gilman's *Moonwise* is a fantasy novel, about a magical world, invented in childhood, which becomes real, and about Ariane's quest to find her friend Sylvie who has vanished within it.

And *Hamlet* is a drama about a young man who doesn't get on with his step-father.

The bald summary makes *Moonwise* sound like a thousand other fantasies: the reunion of the two friends, their tentative return to the world of their imaginings, with its narratives and rituals, its magical talismans and its mythology, Sylvie's disappearance, Ariane's pursuit and the mysterious denizens of Cloud who accompany her, all these could be mixed into an entertaining but unremarkable brew.

That's not the remarkable thing about *Moonwise*, not what won it the Crawford Award for the best first fantasy novel of the year, when it was first published in 1991. That's not what earned it the praise of people like John Clute (who compares it to Tolkien, and to Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist*) and Diana Wynne Jones (who calls it "an amazing book, a work of genius").

The remarkable thing about *Moonwise*, in fact, is the language, dense and punning, rich in archaism and ambiguity. It is not a light and easy read, a tale to be gulped down in one draught. Some readers will be deterred by the need to chew each mouthful carefully, to suck out the substantific marrow. Those who do not enjoy riddles and crosswords, who have never picked up a dictionary to look up one word and found themselves browsing the entry next to it, those who think that prose should be transparent, invisibly connecting the reader and the story - they are not likely to enjoy this book. But those who do enjoy these things will return to reread and find new treasures, new allusions: to the ballads of English folklore, and to the Victorian fairy tales of George Macdonald.

This is the opposite of transparent prose: the words are not an invisible medium which conveys the story, they are the story, and they make a virtue of that fact. Gilman's prose is as dark and prickly as the woodlands of Cloud, and as hard to pin down. It is the landscape of that invented land, a northern Arcadia where the frost bites hard through the ragged clothes of the shepherds. Like the mythology of Cloud, the language is build around a family of dualities: Ariane and Sylvie (air and forest), the sister goddesses Malykorne and Annis, tree and standing stone, the dark and light

phases of the moon in its cyclical death and rebirth. Simple, concrete oppositions: but fold your paper often enough, and a few simple cuts will create all the intricate beauty of a snowflake.

Moonwise is a pleasure for the ear as well as for the mind. In an interview for the SFsite <http://www.sfsite.com/02b/gr170.htm>, Greer Gilman told Sherwood Smith: "Words are like bright stones that you have to put in your mouth, to taste the curve and edge of them, their cool. If I've done it right, people tell me, 'I just had to read that aloud.'" The handsome new hardback edition from Prime Books is easy on the eye, too, with its neat little moons at the head of each chapter, and its typeface which makes the most of every exclamatory O.

Jean Rogers

[Ratcatcher](#) by James McGee (412 Pgs. ISBN: 0-00-721266-6. Price £10.00. Published by Harper Collins, London)

I have a problem with *Ratcatcher*. And I'll admit, it's my problem. Nothing to do with the literary merit, or otherwise, of the book at all. My problem is that it isn't volume four of Neal Stephenson's Baroque Cycle. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem. But so many of the settings, situations and themes (that is to say London, the manufacture of clocks and law enforcement respectively) of Stephenson's tour de force are echoed in *Ratcatcher* that it's almost impossible not to draw comparisons. The major drawback of comparing *Ratcatcher* with Stephenson's books is that there is no comparison. This is not a bad book; it's just not a very good one.

The novel is set in Regency London, shortly after the battle of Trafalgar (1805 - thank you, Google!) and shortly before Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign in 1812 (thank you, Tchaikovsky...). It concerns a Bow Street Runner named Hawkwood and his investigation into the death of a naval courier and, later, the disappearance of a clockmaker. The two are, of course, intimately related.

Here, I think, lies one of the problems with the novel. It has no real ambition; it is desperately pedestrian. Everything happens almost exactly as you would expect it to happen. Life-and-death situations are resolved with the sudden and unexpected appearance that you have been waiting for since Hawkwood managed to get himself into them. At one point, nearly unforgivably, he is saved by the Bad Guy changing his mind about having him killed.

This brings me neatly to the subject of: the villains. To say that you know exactly who they are from the first time they are wheeled onto the page, white furry pussy cat in lap (okay, there is no cat, but there may as well be), is perhaps overstating the case. But only a little. And, when the major villain, who, let us not forget, has Hawkwood in a situation where killing him would be the intelligent thing to do more than once, starts monologuing, you have to wonder if James McGee is taking the piss.

Another serious problem is the central character, Hawkwood. He doesn't actually do anything in the story. Instead, he constantly reacts to what is happening and what he is told. He doesn't solve either of the mysteries he is presented with, nor does he work out the location of the 'Secret Base', nor does he succeed in capturing any of the villains himself. It's arguable that he doesn't even really succeed in thwarting the villains' plot.

Instead, this is all left to his superior, the Chief Magistrate, James Read (who, according the Historical Note at the back of the book, actually existed) or Read's clerk, Ezra Twigg or even Hawkwood's sidekick, Jago. The few times Hawkwood actually takes action, if it doesn't backfire then he totally misinterprets the situation or just plain screws up. One of the characters that Hawkwood befriends is so totally a villain (and a

reasonably psychotic one at that) that his failure to spot this is astounding.

The setting is London at the start of the nineteenth century; unfortunately, I got no sense of this. There was lip-service paid, with descriptions of various parts of the city (including 'St Giles Rookery', which is also mentioned in the Baroque Cycle and doesn't seem to have improved in the intervening century) but there was no real sense of its life. Without the occasional references to the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, I wouldn't have really known when the book was set. This feeling was not helped by the characters. Hawkwood, although an idiot, felt like a very contemporary idiot. There is the odd cliché and the odd clunker (and the sex scenes are, perhaps, not the greatest, but at least they are short), but, on the whole, James McGee's prose does flow along nicely, making the book quite easy to read. This is McGee's first novel so, perhaps, some allowance should be made for its shortcomings. Overall, though, I do find it very difficult to recommend this book. If you're looking for something simple and quick to read, then this won't set your world alight, but it won't trouble you too much either. However, if your desires are a little higher than that, then go and read Neal Stephenson instead.

Stephen Mellor

[The Black Sun](#) by James Twining (464 pages, HarperCollins, ISBN0007190166) Like supermassive black holes some books exert an influence disproportionate to their actual size (culturally-speaking, at least) and, whatever you think of it, Dan Brown's 'The Da Vinci Code' is one of those texts. Whether thriller-writer James Twining found his efforts distorted by the agonising gravitational stresses of market forces, forces which continually whispered "put more art-based conspiracy theories in, put more art-based conspiracy theories in", or whether he really wanted just to write a secret Nazi gold airport bombardier (itself a bit of an all-devouring black hole) is difficult to tell. Certainly, everything about 'The Black Sun' seems to scream, "If you liked Dan Brown, buy me too!" At its heart, though, this is a standard action-thriller in the Robert Ludlum/Clive Cussler mode -- full of globe-cantering, boys, their toys, guns, guns, guns -- but with a continual bead drawn on those all-important film adaptation rights. So much so that in places 'The Black Sun' reads less like an original work than a novelization which has somehow fallen through a time warp from a future where the movie version has just opened on 3000 screens across North America.

This said, things start off briskly enough, with a relatively arresting murder-cum-amputation in a London hospital. An Auschwitz-survivor is killed then his severed arm stolen by some rather Bond Henchmeny type toughs, who proceed to kill off all witnesses to their grisly trophy crime. In Prague a synagogue is desecrated and a seemingly worthless painting by an obscure Jewish wartime painter is stolen. Meanwhile, the National Cryptologic Museum in Maryland also suffers a break-in as a murderous gang snatch a working WW2 Enigma decryption machine. Is there a connection between these seemingly unrelated crimes? Considering we're in thrillerland we'd be fools to think there wasn't, and, sure enough, an elaborate tale of secret codes hidden in art works forming the key to the location of fabled Nazi treasure spools out from these disparate origins. Our heroes are swiftly drawn into a race against time, competing against both the American secret service and a gallery of shadowy neo-Nazi bad guys with implacable supervillain allies.

This is apparently the second entry in what threatens to become, well, a lot of Tom Kirk thrillers, Kirk being Twining's pretty generic master art-thief turned stolen art recoverer to the stars (or, at least, the world's

star museums, governments and private collectors). This poacher-turned-gamekeeper, 'To Catch A Thief' set-up is actually pretty canny, kitting Kirk out with a juicy emotional back story and a variety of skills with which to ratchet up the fun in some of the more effective sequences in the novel (a highly detailed attempt by Kirk to free himself from the inside of a locked vault, for instance).

In its earlier movements the book is impressive staged, but lacks spark. Twining's prose is sharp and detailed, if a little functional, and he handles geographical descriptions with a confidence which generates a real sense of place. The historical underpinnings of his conspiracy plot, too, are imparted with a pleasing economy. Furthermore, there are occasional interstitial touches, such as a seedy Russian nightclub located in an decommissioned nuclear bunker, which show real flair and imagination, but too much here is techno-thriller 101.

Additionally, the solutions to all the setbacks Twining erects for his heroes do seem uncomfortably easy, and very often involve little more than opening a succession of god boxes, introducing characters who are simply plot solutions made flesh ("No, we can't work out how to open the box, but if I call Dhutta, he can do it for us" etc). This seriously defuses the tension which should be at the beating heart of the genre.

A constantly twisting and doglegging plot like this really does need to be drum-tight to be effective, and, sadly, Twining's plot is frustratingly slack in places, hampered by a rash of implausibilities and false conflicts hammered in whenever he thinks our attention might be wandering. There's a real feeling, especially in the latter stages, that characters are being driven by the inflexible dominion of the author's masterplan rather than by any organic developments arising out of anything as touchy-feely as, ooh, say genuine character progression. Kirk and his Spivvy former-fence-turned-business partner, Archie, are basically ciphers, which is a shame, since Twining has provided Kirk with an intriguing relationship to the - severely underwritten - chief villain, Harry Renwick, a former friend of his father's who was once as close to him as an uncle (Kirk also has a conspicuously ambiguous attitude to his deceased pa). It is this emotional energy and interaction rather than the introduction of a fresh set of generic plot hoops which should be powering us through the story, but whenever Kirk confronts Renwick, all he does is moustache twirl and bwa-ha-ha.

Worse still, as the book's climax nears, instead of building up a breathless head of steam, the plotting becomes frankly perfunctory almost to the point of apathy. The showdown between all the various factions vying to claim the glittering prize is dreadfully stodgy stuff. I'm not scattering any spoilers by revealing that exactly the people you expect to die, do, and exactly the betrayals you could have predicted on page 10 play out in due course (though, miraculously, the criminal masterminds who are betrayed fail to see it coming). Twining rouses himself for a mildly innovative twist regarding the prize everyone has been chasing before declining back into a tide of uninterrupted cliché, culminating in an honest to god, "oh no, the villain's buried under all that rubble, no he's not" moment, and a lazy slingshot into sequel 2.

It's a speedy read, but this is effected more by the use of almost subliminally short chapters, flashing past in a blink, than authentic hooks which intrigue and draw us on through the tale. Basically, these are scenes not chapters, underlined by the fussy subtitling which introduces every one with location, date and time, an annoying habit which, when coupled to his desire for cliffhanger chapter breaks, means starting a fresh page in the same location-- only a minute or two later.

On the evidence presented here Twining might be capable of better - his research resonates nicely and his writing commands some authority -- but this feels like piecework, assembled without passion like flatpack furniture. Mass market fiction should aspire to be more - much more, really - than simply a first draft outline for the inevitable feature script, which, unfortunately, is exactly how 'The Black Sun' reads right now.

Gavin Williams

[Dying Light](#) by Stuart MacBride (432 pages, HarperCollins, ISBN 0007193157) Stuart MacBride's 'Dying Light' is the second crime novel to feature his signature protagonist DS Logan McRae, following on from his debut in 'Cold Granite', and, once again, MacBride employs a vividly drawn modern-day Aberdeen as a backdrop for the narrative. However, 'Dying Light' is a work that throws a whole lot of shit, cum and grit in your face but, ultimately, struggles to achieve significance.

DS McRae is a disgraced police hero, languishing out of favour with his superiors after a botched raid that he initiated led to the near-fatal injury of a colleague. As a result, partly as punishment and partly to keep him out of trouble while the wounded officer remains in a coma, McRae is shunted out of the detectives' fast lane and into the reviled "screw-up squad". This is the Aberdeen police department's dustbin, where all the least able and most accident-prone officers are corralled under the enjoyably ramshackle leadership of top screw-up DI Steel, part bad lady, part cartoonish geezer-gal. She is by far the most interesting character here, and the set-up of McRae as whipping boy-cum-essential right hand man to Steel's ambiguously motivated murkily-competent boss should have offered rich opportunities for drama, and an interesting spin on the police procedural template.

Somewhat dishearteningly, however, MacBride chooses to open his plot major with a dead prostitute, and, yes, she is naked, and, yes, she was beaten and, yes, she is found down a back alley. Familiarity doesn't end there, unfortunately, and anyone even lightly versed in the genre will find few surprises in this cast which includes malevolent, grudge-nursing senior policemen, corrupt, sexually perverse local councilmen and a female pathologist habitually referred to, without irony, as the "ice queen", plus an accompanying host of other well-worn thumbnail sketches who trot through the novel's curiously tentative plot. What MacBride does add to the standard recipe is a more than generous helping of ghoulish grunge: the decomposed, seeping corpse of a weeks-dead dog disinterred from a suitcase; officers forced to collect hundreds of used condoms from a local shaggers' corner to test for DNA evidence; a cheerfully grim torture sequence where a character has their fingers sheared off joint by joint, then is forced to eat the sections afterwards. MacBride's "killer app" is nastiness, and there are places in 'Dying Light' where the novel swerves deeply into the literature of disgust. This gives an enjoyable intensity to MacBride's trawl through Aberdeen's criminal and social underbelly, additionally enlivening some of the more stock thriller elements. Furthermore, there's a real sense of Scottish identity radiating off the page, especially in MacBride's use of genuine locations and splinters of well-turned argot.

It's strange then that, in spite of all this, MacBride has created McRae as the point man for his narrative, as he is a curiously uninvolved hero. At least he's nothing so tedious as a renegade wild card, or some loose cannon blow-hard. Logan McRae is definitively a team player and part of that reassuring tradition of dependable, earnest 'tecs. However, he is also a strangely passive and somewhat bloodless figure. In part this arises from the plot corner MacBride has jammed him in, waiting for the results of disciplinary action regarding the botched raid and the coma-cop's fate,

unable to mend or even understand the stresses in his relationship with his WPC girlfriend, and, as the novel wears on, suffering progressive sleep deprivation under DI Steel's outrageous yoke. Furthermore, although he does make a number of crucial intuitive leaps MacBride's constant undermining of McRae by his superiors or his own self-involved nature makes him a difficult character to invest in, with the result that he often comes across as dramatically impotent.

Serial killer police procedurals can be a difficult sell on the page. By their nature they demand a certain degree of repetition, serial crime scenes, serial MOs, heroes drawn back once, twice, multiple times to secluded spots in forests or quarries or wherever, to find those sad, dead, crumpled people. On come the plastic gloves. Post mortems follow. There is a visual energy to forensic investigations which is served rather well by the screen, but which requires a subtly different approach when tackled by prose. The mysteries need to be clearer, the hooks and questions and conclusions need to generate new twists and fresh directions or dynamics, and this is a problem which MacBride doesn't really overcome. We keep ending up in little tents with pathologists, and officers combing the ground for clues, but rarely do these new killings intrigue or horrify, or even add layers to the mystery. They operate more like notches on the bed post, piling up the bodies to prove that this is a serious business, matey. Frankly, it gets kind samey. In fact, coupling these plot cul-de-sacs with DS McRae's slightly blank central presence, 'Dying Light' is not a thriller with an irresistible forward momentum, and it consistently struggles to pace itself. This reviewer, at least, found it an uphill slog to complete.

To be fair the serial killer investigation is not the only case McRae and his colleagues follow -- a spate of deadly arson attacks, a disappearance and drug-related murders all feature -- and the impression of a busy, pressurised organisation trying to keep multiple plates up in the air is quite nicely conveyed. Unfortunately, although the novel follows numerous plot threads, it makes no real attempt to braid them together in the final instance. In fact, most of the antagonists, when revealed, are unknown or peripheral figures, their motives having little bearing on the central themes MacBride wishes to assay (McRae's professional redemption, for instance), and leave one with a definite "so what" feeling. The one instance of a pair of criminals with an 'Of Mice and Men'-style friendship which is both intriguing and crucial to the narrative is, frustratingly, barely developed because it involves a key secret. The crimes in 'Dying Light' seem almost modular, interchangeable even, rather than essential props for this story at this time, with the result that the actual climax - surprisingly rushed and poorly mounted in its own right - zings even less because it stems from an underpowered B-plot rather than the core mysteries.

Sure, Aberdeen lives and breathes evocatively on the page but, leaving aside the enjoyably grisly digressions, there is little else truly striking here. Furthermore, while it wears its badges of near-knuckle realism, and gritty in-yer-face authenticity, there's a chummy, almost TV-cop-show glaze to the atmosphere. Nothing surprises, scrotes are scrotes, lawyers are always amoral scumbags, and assisting clinical psychologists are always pompous, patronising twits getting in the way of real police work. DS McRae's colleagues are mostly rendered with the broadest of brush splashes (one character, for instance, is nothing more than an inveterate soaps bore, chuntering endlessly about Corrie or Brookside) and the few cameos which do sparkle with darker depths are skated over in favour of the blander procedural clichés 'Dying Light' offers.

There's no fatal fault-line running through 'Dying Light', but, equally, there are no great innovations either, and it's difficult to see, other than its splashier excesses, why you should read MacBride's effort rather

than one of the fifty other police procedurals on the shelf. The writing itself has a rough-hewn edge at best, but is merely crude much of the time. I know I won't remember it in ten years, or even five. I may not be able to tell you how it ends six months from now. It's just not that memorable. 'Dying Light' is essentially a feature-length episode of 'The Bill', just with added torture and used condom-gathering. Rugged but plodding, flashing the odd broken-toothed smile of psychotic invention, but finally adding up to much less than the sum of its parts. A shame.

Gavin Williams

[Raven Black](#) by Ann Cleeves (Macmillan, ISBN 1-4050-5472-7, Cover price £10)

There is a cosy tradition in crime fiction in which murders occur in a small community, a pastoral idyll in which people know each other's secrets, so that an insider is able to solve the mystery and restore the order which violence has disrupted. *Raven Black* brings death to that most rural of settings, the Shetland Islands, but it is no *Midwinter Murders*.

It has more in common with HRF Keating's Indian novels, or Tony Hillerman's tales of the Navajo Tribal Police: murder is the lens through which an unfamiliar society can be viewed. Ann Cleeves writes of Shetland as an outsider, one whose perceptions of the place were sharpened by coming there as a double outsider. She worked as a cook at the Bird Observatory on Fair Isle, a non-islander in the islands and a non-twitcher among the birders.

Her central character, detective Jimmy Perez, is so much an insider that he's almost out the other side. His Spanish name (and looks) might mislead those unaware of the tradition in the Northern Isles which links local families to the sailors who survived the wreck of the Spanish Armada. Perez was born on that most isolated of the islands, Fair Isle; he came to Lerwick as a schoolboy, and grew up with many of the book's characters, yet retains his sense of being from somewhere else.

Shetland in winter is far from cosy; the beginning and end of the narrative are the two ends of the month of January, each with its traditional festivities. But there's nothing picturesque about the lonely old man waiting hopelessly to be visited by first footers at the New Year, or in the frantic excitement of the climax, in the dark shadows cast by the boisterous celebrations of Up Helly Aa.

Raven Black is a believable depiction of life in a harsh but beautiful landscape, with its richness and frustrations, the physical space and freedom but the constriction of a small society, the frustration of the young people, the loneliness - and the irresistible pull it exercises on those who choose to make their life there.

It is the perfect setting for a murder mystery, and *Raven Black* is also a completely satisfying detective story, with a resolution which manages to surprise, while making you feel that you ought not have been surprised, that all you have been told leads to this end. Enough is left unresolved, not least in the life of Jimmy Perez, to leave the reader hungry for the next instalment.

Jean Rogers

 Jesse Kellerman, [Sunstroke](#) (Time Warner £9.99)
 James Siegel, [Detour](#) (Time Warner £6.99)
 Jeff Abbott, [Panic](#) (Time Warner £6.99)

Jesse Kellerman's debut, *Sunstroke*, is unapologetically being marketed on the strength of his parents' fame as crime / thriller writers. This dynastic approach to gaining attention can have its disadvantages: in another sphere, see Mrs Thatcher's little boy. There is no reason to suppose that literary talent is genetically transmitted, but fortunately, Jesse Kellerman can write with wit, economy, properly embedded dialogue and a brooding sense of place. *Sunstroke* is an interesting and slightly unusual debut. Whether crime is really the field in which Kellerman ought to be working is another matter.

Gloria Mendez is in love with her boss, Carl Pereira. Without the least encouragement, she has been waiting for him to reciprocate, there in the office among the stock for his flourishing comic novelties business. Carl goes to Mexico and is apparently killed in a car accident. Gloria goes in pursuit. Her determination to do the right thing leads to the unravelling of Carl's identity in ways it would be unfair to reveal.

Identity is a problem for Gloria, too. The illegitimate daughter of an impoverished Mexican immigrant, she has brains but ill-fortune, having had to abandon her training as a doctor in order to care for her mother. Her marriage to a charming but egomaniacal black detective has failed. At thirty-six, she needs to stake a claim on life. Kellerman pays this theme a good deal more than lip service, running it in parallel with a depiction of terrible guilt. Mexico, not for the first time, functions as a mirror-world to American affluence, a place of dream-logic, where greed, desire, delusion and moral exhaustion are revealed in their true light. If Gloria were not of Mexican descent, these passages could seem like acts of reactionary contempt, though Kellerman is careful to create a world where need can outbid legality. The Mexican hospital scenes provoke genuine horror.

With a handful of exceptions, it is in the nature of thrillers to disappoint at the last. What revelation could live up to the sense of mystery? The reader's desire to be beguiled is probably more powerful than the need to be enlightened. *Sunstroke* in fact runs out of plot before it runs out of story. It closes with an extended diminuendo in which Gloria attempts to reconcile herself to things as they are, perhaps to a fundamental homelessness, perhaps to seek consolation with another black policeman, the stiff and gentlemanly (but salsa-dancing) Waxbone. There is, then, a slight mismatch between genre and aspiration, with character tending to outweigh action. It will be interesting see whether Kellerman finds enough room in the thriller for his evident ambitions.

James Siegel's *Detour* also goes south of the border, all the way to Colombia, where Paul and Joanna Breidhard, unable to have children themselves, travel in order to adopt an orphan. The child goes missing, the couple are abducted and the explanatory trail leads back through the bloodstained paramilitary conflict between factions of Left and Right, via (to put it mildly) ambiguous American involvement, and ultimately to the Breidhards' Manhattan doorstep.

Siegel can write action very effectively. There is a memorable, even nightmarish scene of pursuit through New Jersey marshland, in which identity and motive are effectively withheld, faintly reminiscent of *North By Northwest*. At some stage, though, the relationship of plot and theme becomes reversed, so that what's really at issue (America / money/ power/ responsibility) becomes the pretext for the shoot-'em-up elements. This is a pity, because *Detour* is haunted by what it might have been - a book about the inseparability of the personal and the political. There are enough hints about the well-meaning but indisputable complacency of the Breidhards to make the reader wonder what a writer such as Robert Stone might have

made of these materials, but where Stone is relentless it seems that Siegel might be a little nervous about the conclusions his material suggests. Heavens - the accusation of liberalism is always waiting in the wings. The sense of compromise is strengthened by a tendency simply to give information (for example historical and political background) rather than allowing it to emerge in the life of narrative and dialogue. This is an indication that the imagined reader is one who wants to get on with it rather than into it. Detour is also dying to be a film, dying to get off the page and into the eye.

Jeff Abbott has an enthusiastic readership, whose interests seem likely to include cars, guns and fantasies of blood-stained justice. They know what they like. Readers whose interests lie elsewhere may find Panic reminiscent of Scooby-Doo with added semi-automatic fire. Imagine a Stephen Seagal film without the intellectual rigour. Sounds good? Be my guest.

Sean O'Brien

[Firethorn](#) by Sarah Micklem (383 pages. Hardback ISBN: 0-00-720396-9. Price £12.99; paperback ISBN0007193068, Price: £6.99. Published by Voyager Books, London)

I really enjoyed this book. I found it very hard to find anything actually wrong with it, although I did manage in the end... But I'll come to that later. I'll start off with the good stuff.

While 'Firethorn' has quite a standard 'Northern European Feudal' fantasy setting, it has been made more interesting than your standard fantasy by its focus, closely following a peasant woman and viewing the world solely through her eyes.

In this novel, the peasant woman, the eponymous Firethorn (named for a psychedelic berry that she ingests early in the novel) starts off as a fairly ordinary peasant, although with one or two odd trappings - her knowledge of herblore, for example, which she learnt at the knee of the recently departed Dame for whom she used to be handmaiden. With the death of the Dame (dead people are not named for a year and a day after their death to avoid drawing the wrath of the spirit) her domains are handed on to her nephew, Sire Pava and his bride. They are, of course, boorish and unpleasant and, when Pava attempts to rape Firethorn, she runs away and spends a year living in the Kingswood.

All this is covered in the prologue to the novel. It doesn't really have a lot to do with the rest, although it is necessary to give us a feel for the setting. The book really gets started when the leader of the clan comes to collect Sire Pava to set out to war. They arrive in the midst of the preparations for the Upside-Down Days, when peasants are served by nobles and everyone sleeps with everyone else, irrespective of social class. Firethorn meets Sire Galan and the two become enchanted with one another. When the soldiers continue on their journey, Firethorn travels with them as Galan's 'sheath' - and that is exactly what you think it is.

A large part of 'Firethorn' is essentially about sex. Fortunately, Sarah Micklem has the sense to avoid describing it in intricate detail. She suggests and hints in a way that makes it seem more intimate than any mere description could be. The language of sex is earthy and passionate and atmospheric and in no way flowery. This style is not saved just for talk of sex; the language throughout the novel is very much in the same tone. It conjures up a very Anglo-Saxon feeling; there are none of your Latin impositions here.

'Firethorn' is also about gender. More specifically, it is about the place that a woman holds when she is in the midst of men. The vast majority of characters in the book are male. Women are treated as objects of contempt and derision - Firethorn is especially subject to this. As a sheath she is little better than a whore. It is only through Galan's imposition on several occasions that she does not become the target for another's lust.

And this leads me to the problem that I had with the book. Almost without exception, the male characters are extremely unsympathetic. Even Sire Galan, who deeply loves and is equally deeply loved by Firethorn, is portrayed as being often vicious, unthinking and brutal, prone to bouts of jealousy and violence. This character trait is apparent to a greater or lesser extent in all the male characters, although it is much more marked in the nobility (the Blood, as they are known), although it still exists in the peasants (the Drudges). Most of the female characters are, conversely, sympathetic - wise, gentle and patient. The only exceptions to this rule are the Blood females (with the exception of the Dame, who is dead and therefore doesn't count) who are all screaming harpies or shrill, shrewish harridans. (It should also be noted that the few vaguely sympathetic men are all Drudges).

All that, aside, however, it is still an extremely compelling book. A couple of times I wondered why Firethorn was putting up with Galan treating her as he did, but, on the whole, it does work. And the answer is, I suspect, because she didn't really have any choice. She was a very long way from home and dependent upon Galan for protection, shelter and food as well as love.

'Firethorn' is, on the whole, a novel that is setting up the situation for the next two books in the trilogy. Much happens, but there is a lot more to come. It is quite a slow book, but this is not a bad thing. It takes its time and fills us with descriptions of life, the world around Firethorn, and the social, political and religious situations beautifully. Firethorn's world is fully realised and we are able to see just what the life of these people is like.

'Firethorn' is a novel about sex and love and how the one can follow the other in the most unlikely circumstances. It also tells us about the things people will do for that love and the paths down which it will lead us if we aren't careful. I for one will be eager to follow Firethorn wherever she may lead when the second volume is published.

Stephen Mellor

Barry Eisler, [One Last Kill](#), (Penguin/Michael Joseph, ISBN: 0718148975, £12.99)

Every age gets the secret agent thrillers of its dreams and nightmares. Before the First World War there were the Empire certainties of John Buchan. In the gathering storm of 1938 it was Rogue Male, Geoffrey Household's assassin turned to feral desperation in the struggle to survive. Come the Cold War John Le Carre's studies in moral confusion were right for the world of mutually assured destruction.

Author Barry Eisler's hired killer John Rain has been gathering popularity over several novels. Rain's a very modern creature. Half-Japanese, half-American, he circulates around the globe effortlessly, adroitly going native as the job and his survival require it. He knows exactly what drink to order in Brazil, and where to find the best jazz bar in Bangkok.

Rain is entirely independent. He has no family and no allegiances. He'll work for whoever pays, half before, half on delivery. He does, it's true, have some moral limits: no women, no children, no 'acts against non-principals', and even as he dispatches thugs and hirelings without any compunction, it's always on what is presumably the side of the good guys in the wars on drugs, corruption and terror.

His unique selling point is the ability to kill a man and make it look like either natural causes or at the very least not an assassination. His clients pay to avoid the embarrassment of being implicated in the murder. Preferring to work without guns, Rain is a polyglot of martial arts, his body itself a honed weapon, even as the Vietnam veteran enters middle-age.

In short, Rain, jet-hopping and entirely autonomous, is a citizen of the post-nation state globalised world, the perfect fantasy figure for corporate man trying to find meaning in his jet-lagged life. Once you've settled down in business class and had your meal, Eisler's page-turny thrill-fests are the perfect pace and length for a long-haul flight.

Eisler's latest, *One Last Kill*, offers a torn-from-today's-headlines plot that moves on from the Japanese focus of most of the previous instalments to widen the appeal. Rain has been hired by Mossad to kill one of their own: an Israeli chemist who's become Al Qaeda's inhouse expert for mass terror bombings.

In a variant on that old stand-by, the ageing gun-slinger, Rain, uncharacteristically overcome with human frailty, hesitates when he sees his target's young son. For Mossad he's now a liability and Rain is forced to go on the run, with a rogue CIA operative in league with the forces of terror also in hot pursuit across Hong Kong, Thailand and the Philippines.

Those business travellers can appreciate the details wherever they might take *One Last Kill*. The thriller wears its research on its sleeve: you feel pretty sure it would serve well as a guide book for the coffee shops and city transport details that pepper and authenticate the action. Of course, the sense of authenticity doesn't stop there: the intricately choreographed fight scenes and jargon-heavy points of the secret agent's 'tradecraft' are the meat for the eternal male adolescent's relish.

Eisler's publishers are eager to let us know he spent several years working for the CIA in Japan - doing exactly what we can only excitedly speculate - and the depth and intensity of his training in judo and other martial arts.

This is writing with a hard-on for violence, and the action does move along at (often literally) break-neck pace. For those who need a softer edge, Rain enjoys a torrid affair with Mossad seductress Delilah. There's also the hokey buddy-buddy banter between him and his newly-acquired working partner Dox, who he met in the glory days of the Afghan war against the Soviets (one wonders how this unsolitary set-up squares with the code of conduct at the Guild of Lone Assassins, or whatever other body takes care of these gentlemen's pension funds).

Escapism is fine, but, for all the pleasure Eisler's fans will find, is there anything in *One Last Kill* that spills into the real world? Mostly written in the first person, its tensions are artificial and schematic; the way this story is told you know it's unlikely the narrator is going to die. The question isn't whether he will he survive and succeed, but rather how. The limited thrills of killing without risk will be familiar for those who have played the computer game *Doom* in practice mode.

Yet perhaps that's precisely the point. As Rain observes, private contractors are the third largest contributor of forces to the coalition forces in Iraq. Inadvertently or not, Eisler has given us a hero for such times: a private contractor who fights and kills seemingly without risk, much like the asymmetrical wars of bombs dropped by telemetry at a distance. George W. Bush recently wrote Eisler a letter of appreciation. You have been warned.

Ben Felsenburg

Contributors:

Chaz Brenchley

Chaz Brenchley has been making a living as a writer since he was eighteen. He is the author of nine thrillers, most recently [Shelter](#), and two major fantasy series: The Books of Outremer, based on the world of the Crusades, and Selling Water by the River, set in an alternate Ottoman Istanbul. A winner of the British Fantasy Award, he has also published three books for children and more than 500 short stories in various genres. His time as Crimewriter-in-Residence at the St Peter's Riverside Sculpture Project in Sunderland resulted in the collection Blood Waters. He is a prizewinning ex-poet, and has been writer in residence at the University of Northumbria, as well as tutoring their MA in Creative Writing. His novel Dead of Light is currently in development with an independent film company; Shelter has been optioned by Granada TV. He was Northern Writer of the Year 2000, and lives in Newcastle upon Tyne with a quantum cat and a famous teddy bear.

Ann Cleeves

Ann Cleeves grew up in North Devon. She has worked as bird observatory cook, women's refuge leader, probation officer and auxiliary coastguard. Now she promotes reading for Kirklees libraries. She's also Harrogate Crime-Writing Festival's Reader in Residence and runs its celebrated outreach programme. She started writing when she lived with her ornithologist husband on Hilbre, an otherwise uninhabited island in the Dee estuary. Most of her novels are set in Northumberland, the county she thinks of as home. Her most recent book, [RAVEN BLACK](#), is based in Shetland and is the first in a Northern Isles quartet. Her short film for Border TV - CATCHING BIRDS - won a Royal Television Society award. She has twice been nominated for a CWA Dagger.

Martin Edwards

Martin Edwards was twice short-listed for a CWA Dagger, Martin Edwards has published two Lake District Mysteries: 'The Coffin Trail' and '[The Cipher Garden](#)'. He has also written seven novels about Liverpool lawyer Harry Devlin, most recently 'First Cut is the Deepest'. 'Take My Breath Away' is a psychological thriller and he completed the late Bill Knox's last book, '[The Lazarus Widow](#)'. He has edited 14 crime anthologies and his own collected stories appear in 'Where Do You Find Your Ideas?' 'Urge To Kill' is a study of homicide investigation; he has published seven other non-fiction books and many articles and reviews about the genre.

Ben Felsenburg

London-based writer and journalist Ben Felsenburg has written extensively on film, dance and television. A graduate of the Creative Writing MA programme at Goldsmiths, he has continued at the college to work on a PhD, and is currently writing a novel, Shivah, an exploration of sphincters, comedy and death. Earlier in his career he worked as a teacher, cinema manager, recruitment consultant and hospital porter. He is a misanthropic humanist and hopes life will one day match the moment as a teenager he met Keith Richards in the basement bar at Ronnie Scott's.

John Jarrold

John Jarrold established and ran the science fiction and fantasy lists for three major UK publishers, before quitting the corporate world to work as a freelance editor and literary consultant. He has now set up an agency specialising in genre fiction. He has reviewed regularly in magazines and online, and broadcast on both radio and TV. His website is <https://www.sff.net/people/john-jarrold/> and he hosts an active web forum at <http://www.ttapress.com/discus/messages/1976/1976.html?1137677691>

Juliet E McKenna

Juliet E McKenna has been fascinated by myth and history, other worlds and other peoples since she first learned to read at the age of three. After studying Greek and Roman history and literature at St Hilda's, Oxford, she worked in Human Resources before a career change to combine book-selling and motherhood. Her first novel, *The Thief's Gamble* appeared in 1999. She is now the author of the highly acclaimed Tales of Einarinn series, currently translated into more than a dozen languages as well as assorted shorter fiction. She still keeps a keen eye on book retailing issues and when invited, runs writing workshops for SF&F conventions, literary festivals and creative writing organisations. At present, she is writing Eastern Tide, the final volume of The Aldabreshin Compass sequence and contemplating various new projects. She is also one of the leading lights of a successful SF&F authors' publicity initiative, The Write Fantastic. Living in Oxfordshire, with her sons and husband, she fits in her writing around her family and vice versa.

Stephen Mellor

Stephen Mellor lives in Newcastle upon Tyne, coming back to that city after spending time in Paris and London. He has done a great many really poor jobs, although he's just got one which looks like it is going to be at least bearable. Stephen is attempting to write a novel, although it may be fairer to say that Stephen is actually failing miserably to write a novel. This is down, at least in part, to the fact that most of his evenings are taken up with studying to become a Systems Engineer but a large part of it is, undoubtedly, to do with laziness. Stephen has been married for nearly a year, although he was with his wife for fourteen and a half years before they managed to get around to actually getting hitched (see what I mean about laziness?) and has a wonderful two-and-a-half year old son named Max. Stephen finds it exceptionally strange writing about himself in the third person.

Farah Mendlesohn

Farah Mendlesohn is editor of *Foundation: the International Review of Science Fiction*. She has just published Diana Wynne Jones and the *Children's Fantastic and Historical Tradition*, and is currently working on a book about children's science fiction.

Sean O'Brien

Sean O'Brien is a British poet, critic, playwright, broadcaster, anthologist, short story writer and editor. He grew up in Hull and now lives in Newcastle upon Tyne. His five collections of poetry to date have all won awards, most recently *Downriver* (Picador, 2001), which won the 2001 Forward Prize for Best Collection. *Cousin Coat: Selected Poems 1976-2001* (Picador) was published in 2002. His book of essays on contemporary poetry, *The Deregulated Muse* (Bloodaxe), was published in 1998, as was his acclaimed anthology *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (Picador). His plays, which include a new verse version of Aristophanes' *Birds*, are published by Methuen and his short stories by Comma Press. He is Professor of Poetry at Sheffield Hallam University, where he teaches on the MA Writing course, and is one of the editors of *Ten Hallam Poets*. He is a Visiting Professor at Newcastle University. Five new short stories are published in *Ellipsis 1* (Comma Press, 2005). His version of Dante's *Inferno* is published by Picador in 2006.

'...the bard of urban Britain' - The Times.

'...a terrific language technician' - The Guardian.

'...marvellously assured.[Downriver] is the most invigorating book of poems I've read this year.' - The Sunday Telegraph.

Jean Rogers

Jean Rogers has a doctorate in medieval literature; she designs web sites for a living. She has been reading comics since the 1950s, when American comics still arrived erratically, allegedly because they were carried as ballast on cargo ships.

Her web site about comics is The Shadow Gallery

<http://www.shadowgallery.co.uk>. She does not enjoy being photographed.

Sharon Sadle

Sharon Sadle escaped her cubicle on september 22, 2005. she's been traveling away from her hometown in florida by car, north and west, ever since. from the road, sharon writes about coffee with strikers, darts with bartenders, forays into abandoned factories and contemplative discomposure along the byways of the united states. her stash of socks totals 44 pairs.

Andrew Taylor

Andrew Taylor's crime novels include [The American Boy](#) (An Unpardonable Crime in the US), which involves the young Edgar Allan Poe and is set in the 19th century. It was selected by the Richard and Judy Book Club and won both the Historical Dagger and the Audie. He has also written the Dougal Series, the Lydmouth Series and the Roth Trilogy. He is the only person to have won the Historical Dagger of the Crime Writers' Association twice. He won the CWA's John Creasey Award with his first novel, Caroline Minuscule and he has been shortlisted for both the Gold Dagger and Edgar.

Andrew Taylor's novels are widely translated. According to public library figures, he is one of Britain's most borrowed authors. He reviews, mainly for the Spectator and the Independent. He also edits The Author, the quarterly journal of the Society of Authors.

His next novel, A Stain on the Silence (Michael Joseph/Penguin), will be published in April 2006.

His website is www.andrew-taylor.co.uk

Gavin Williams

Gavin Williams principally works as a scriptwriter for television and film in the UK. He has developed a number of original series ideas with, among others, Carlton Television and YTV, and has been commissioned by Granada, Pilgrim Films, HTV West and the BBC. He has written for Channel 5's Urban Gothic horror anthology series and in 2001 his film, "Rob of the Rovers", starring Gary Lewis ("Billy Elliott", "Gangs of New York") was long-listed for a BAFTA. Prior to his screenwriting career Gavin's short fiction and reviews were widely published in magazines and anthologies. During 2000 at the World Horror Convention in Denver his story, Brief People, won a BEST SHORT FICTION award. Also in 2000 his novel, "[Hush](#)", written in collaboration with Tim Lebbon, was published by Razorblade Press. It was short-listed for August Derleth Award for Best Novel in British Fantasy Awards the following year. "Hush" was republished in 2005 by US-based Delirium Books as part of their Dark Essentials series (Volume 3, Book 1) ISBN 1-929653-70-0