



by Steve Steinbock

Splitting detective novels into the subgroups “cozy” and “hardboiled” is convenient, but it’s artificial and hardly precise. Is it the presence of violence and four-letter words that makes a book “hardboiled”? If so, most contemporary fiction could be labeled as such. And what makes a “cozy” book so cozy? The country-village setting and the personality of the hero? The plot structure with its elaborate parlor-room denouement? I’ve chosen books this month that demonstrate how arbitrary and artificial these categories can be and at the same time how richly colorful and varied the mystery genre is. None demonstrate this as well as Louise Penny’s series set in the Quebec village of Three Pines, now the basis for an Amazon Prime TV series starring Alfred Molina as Inspector Armand Gamache.

***** Louise Penny, *A World of Curiosities*, Minotaur Books, \$29.99. Inspector Gamache and Agent Jean-Guy Beauvoir revisit their first case together, the murder of a drug addict who sold her preteen children into prostitution. Years later, the two now-grown children visit the village of Three Pines, opening emotional wounds in the community and in Gamache’s own family. When a hidden room bricked off for 150 years is discovered above the local bookstore, Gamache finds bizarre artifacts, including a seventeenth-century book of magical spells and a huge canvas reproduction of *The Paston Collection*, a still life from the 1670s depicting over two hundred “curiosities.” But this reproduction contains twentieth-century anachronisms that hint at the return of Gamache’s greatest foe. As always, Penny’s storytelling is rich, emotional, and layered with meaning.

**** Anthony Horowitz, *The Twist of a Knife*, Harper, \$29.99 (HC), \$15.99 (e-book). Anthony Horowitz is the creator of *Foyle’s War*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Magpie Murders*, and the Alex Rider YA series. He’s also the fictional Watson in a series featuring himself and disgraced ex-Scotland Yard detective Daniel Hawthorne. As *The Twist of a Knife* opens, the fictional Anthony Horowitz is preparing for the opening of his play *Mindgame* on the London stage. On opening night, the cast and crew are shaken by the presence of the acerbic theater critic Harriet Throsby. Her review is cruel and merciless, and the following morning her body is discovered with a dagger—bearing Horowitz’s

fingerprints—stuck in her chest. Nearly everyone associated with the play had the means, motive, and opportunity to kill the critic, but Horowitz is the prime suspect, relying on Daniel Hawthorne to find the true killer. The book drags during a lengthy side plot, but everything falls together in the final chapters as Hawthorne gathers all the suspects in a long and well-told denouement set on the theater stage.

***** Stephen O'Shea, *The Sorcerer and the Assassin*, Brash Books, \$18.99. In 1242, Dominican friars have launched an inquisition in southern France, rounding up and executing suspected heretics. But someone is killing off the inquisitors. The queen of France enlists the brilliant physician Balian of Mallorca to hunt down the assassin. Although few would mourn the death of the inquisitors, Balian's job is to help avert an uprising. Teamed up with Balian is Matilda of Périgueux, a young noblewoman with clairvoyant talents. Together, the physician/sorcerer and Matilda—masquerading as a young man—search the trail of the assassin. Journalist and historian O'Shea paints a vivid portrait of medieval France in a fascinating, fun, and well-paced adventure.

**** Gigi Pandian, *The Raven Thief*, Minotaur Books, \$26.99 (HC), \$13.99 (e-book). After Tempest Raj helps her father's crew renovate the home of Lavinia Kingsley, a mock séance is performed to symbolically exorcise Kingsley's still-living ex-husband, horror writer Corbin Colt, from her home. But when the lights come on, the séance participants find the dead body of Colt on the table in front of them. The seemingly impossible appearance is complicated by the fact that minutes earlier, Colt was taking part in a live interview fifty-five miles away. Not only is Tempest's grandfather arrested as the prime suspect, but Tempest discovers that the novel Colt had been working on was based on the disappearance of Tempest's mother. Pandian fills her Secret Staircase series—of which *The Raven Thief* is the second volume—with entertaining characters and classical mystery lore.

**** Melissa Yi, *The Shapes of Wrath*, Windtree Press, \$4.99 (e-book). Montreal medical resident Hope Sze has appeared in a nine-book series and several short stories (including “Flamingo Flamenco” in the May/June 2021 issue of *EQMM*). With *The Shapes of Wrath*, Dr. Sze is back in a new series themed around the Seven Deadly Sins. Hope has the misfortune of doing her surgery rotations in Operating Room 3 under the attending physician Vladimir Vrac, a womanizing, arrogant, butt-pinching creep. Six months earlier a patient died under his scalpel, but Vrac is an expert when it comes to skirting blame. After a series of unexplained injuries and a dead anesthesiologist, Hope refuses to let anyone's guilt get swept under the rug. An emergency-room physician herself, Melissa Yi flavors her medical thrillers with authentic but easy to understand details.

**** Lee Goldberg, *Movieland*, Thomas & Mercer, \$24.95 (HC), \$15.95 (TPB), \$4.99 (e-book). For decades, Malibu Creek State Park was used as the set for dozens of Twentieth Century Fox films. But for more than a year someone has been using the park for shotgun practice, frightening campers, hikers, and ecologists. Park officials downplay the situation, saying the incidents are unrelated or ignoring them altogether. But when a popular political blogger is fired on and her companion is killed, homicide detectives Eve Ronin and Duncan Pavone are called to investigate. But their jobs are stymied by local bureaucrats as well as Eve's resentful colleagues. I've praised Goldberg's

writing in the past, and particularly his Eve Ronin series, of which this is the fourth volume. I don't need to say much more. Read it.

**** Elle Cosimano, *Finlay Donovan Jumps the Gun*, Minotaur Books, \$26.99 (HC), \$13.99 (e-book). Finlay Donovan is a recently divorced single mother and author trying to finish her next book between changing diapers and dodging bullets. To help her friend and live-in nanny repay a debt to an Atlantic City loan shark, Finlay agrees to help a Russian mob boss track down a hitman known as EasyClean. There's a lot going on in this novel, much of it confusing unless you've read the previous two books in the series. But the author has done the seemingly impossible by blending a cute cozy with a hard-boiled caper plot reminiscent of Donald Westlake's Parker novels. The writing is fast-paced and the humor throughout is natural.

Last year (*EQMM* July/August, 2021) I reviewed *Murder, She Drew Vol. 2*, a Japanese illustrated study of the historical works of John Dickson Carr. Akira Moriwaki, Cuckoo Morisaki, and Tim Kashiba—writing collectively under the name “The Talkative Middles”—have recently published *Carr Graphic Vol. 1: The Dawn of Miracles* (TMB, ¥2,500). This illustrated guide contains crime-scene maps, descriptions, and discussion of twelve early John Dickson Carr novels. The three collaborators' ongoing discussion of Carr's work, unfortunately for most of us, is entirely in Japanese. But the book is filled with Cuckoo Morisaki's illustrations, including forty-four pages of maps and crime-scene depictions annotated in English and Japanese. Also mentioned is The Jury Box and Carr's role as *EQMM*'s book reviewer. To order the book, contact Mr. Moriwaki at tao-owl@jcom.home.ne.jp.

Max Allan Collins may be the busiest crime writer around, with an average of seven new titles per year. His recent books include *The Big Bundle* (Hard Case Crime, \$22.99), in which P.I. Nathan Heller tries to solve a high-profile kidnapping case, *Quarry's Blood* (Hard Case Crime, \$22.99) featuring Collins's long-running series hitman, and *Kill Me If You Can* (Titan Books, \$24.95) featuring Mike Hammer. The latter, bearing the byline “Mickey Spillane and Max Allan Collins,” is based on notes left behind by Spillane and also contains an essay and five short stories edited and completed by Collins. Also from Collins and cowriter James L. Traylor is *Spillane—King of Pulp Fiction* (Mysterious Press, \$26.95), the first-ever biography of Mickey Spillane.

© 2023 by Steve Steinbock