



by Steve Steinbock

Throughout most of its eighty-plus-year history, *EQMM* has been an active force in promoting international crime fiction. Our August 1947 “All Nations Issue” featured fourteen stories from around the world, including two tales (one by George Simenon and the other by Jorge Luis Borges) translated by Anthony Boucher, the man who would serve as *EQMM*’s book reviewer starting in the late 1950s. This recognition of international mysteries, begun under the editorial leadership of Frederic Dannay, continued under editor Eleanor Sullivan. During the past twenty years, current editor Janet Hutchings has carried on the tradition with the regular Passport to Crime feature. We lead off this month’s Jury Box with several international mysteries.

**** René Appel, *The Amsterdam Lawyer*, translated from the Dutch by Josh Pachter, Genius Book Publishing, \$17.95. Criminal defense attorney David Driessen is good at what he does, getting his clients’ cases dismissed, whether guilty or not. But David’s personal life, with marital problems and a gambling addiction, is not so successful. When he befriends Hein Wesseling, a real-estate magnate operating on the fringes of the law, David’s life begins spiraling out of control. Appel is the author of more than thirty crime novels in his native Netherlands. Originally published in 2013 as *De advocaat*, this is his first novel to be published in English. Josh Pachter, whose many translations (including several of Appel’s short stories) have appeared in *EQMM*, renders the Dutch into clear, often edgy English.

**** Juan Gómez-Jurado, *Red Queen*, translated from the Spanish by Nick Caistor, Minotaur, \$27.99. Madrid police detective Jon Gutiérrez is in trouble, caught in the act of planting evidence. Expecting to lose his job and face arrest, Jon accepts an offer he can’t refuse. A man known only as “Mentor” arranges for Jon’s crimes to be forgiven if he teams up with Antonia Scott, the smartest woman in Spain, taking part in a top-secret organization created to solve the country’s most challenging cases. Their first assignment is to find the killer of a banker’s son and rescue a kidnapped heiress. The way the character of Antonia Scott is portrayed—at times acutely antisocial while at other times acting the part of an enthusiastic socialite—makes her often seem

implausible. But the interplay between Scott and her unlikely partner Inspector Gutiérrez make the pair an endearing team. Amazon Prime Video has adapted the series for television under the original Spanish title, *Reina Roja*, to be available sometime this year.

**** Colin Cotterill, *The Motion Picture Teller*, Soho Crime, \$27.95. After fifteen novels featuring Lao state coroner Siri Paiboun, Cotterill's latest book, a standalone advertised as "a detective story without a crime," is set in 1990s Thailand. Supot Yongjaiyut is a postman in the district of Bangkok Noi who spends his free time watching old movies in his best friend's video-rental shop. While the two men are watching *The Big Sleep*, a homeless man comes to the store selling a bag of random videotapes. Supot borrows one of the tapes, a film called *Bangkok 2010*. When he watches the film, he finds it to be the greatest marvel of Thai cinema, but one that no one has heard of. Supot's fascination with the film and his infatuation with the beautiful star leads him on a search for the film's origin. Part fable, part love story, and part detective story, *The Motion Picture Teller* is both funny and moving.

***** Cathy Ace, *The Case of the Absent Heirs*, Four Tales Publishing, \$31.99 (HC), \$15.99 (TPB), \$15.99 (e-book). A year after the death of Welsh sheep farmer Gwynfor Jeffries, his attorney is unable to locate the man's three sons to distribute his estate. The ladies of the WISE Enquiries Agency are hired to locate the missing heirs. But it's a busy time, with Christmas quickly approaching and some unknown party cementing offensive gifts to people's doorsteps. On top of that, the in-laws of Henry Devereaux Twyst, Duke of Chellingworth have been swindled out of their entire savings. I've read a number of Ace's novels, but *Absent Heirs*, the sixth in the series, was my first exposure to the WISE Enquiries Agency. The cast of characters is massive, and at first hard to keep track of, but the situations combined with Ace's moving and comedic telling made the novel a pleasure to read. It's a perfect cozy with a setting and wit reminiscent of Wodehouse's *Blandings Castle*. But its strongest feature is the heart and sensitivity with which Ace imbues her characters.

**** Lina Chern, *To Play the Fool*, Bantam, \$17.95. Katie True is a self-professed screwup, a failure at almost everything she tries. But Katie has two interrelated talents: She can read people, and she can read tarot cards. For her, there's nothing magic about the cards. She uses the arcana to draw the truth out of people. When a strange, paranoid man with a bleeding head wound enters the import shop where she works, she offers to read his cards, and in so doing sneaks a peek at his cell phone. But she's not prepared for what she sees: her friend Marley resting against a Dumpster with a bullet hole in her head. Determined to find out what happened to her friend, Katie finds herself getting deeper into trouble as the mysteries accumulate. The remarkable thing about Chern's debut novel is how it has all the trappings of a cozy, yet can be so un-cozy. The storytelling is fun and funny, and the use of tarot cards to express and explore characters is brilliant.

**** Joyce Carol Oates, *48 Clues into the Disappearance of My Sister*, Mysterious Press, \$26.95. Georgene Fulmer's older sister Marguerite was always prettier, smarter, and more talented. And then, in 1991, Marguerite disappeared. Looking back on the events surrounding the disappearance and the subsequent effect it had on her family, Georgene ("G") reflects on the many clues left behind that could explain M's disappearance. Told as

stream-of-consciousness in Oates's hauntingly poetic style, it's a story of envy and disappointment. As G relates her search for clues, we are drawn into her disturbed mind. *48 Clues* is not a happy novel, but in Oates's hands, it's a gently unsettling tale of suspense.

**** Dikkon Eberhart, *Egg Island*, \$12.99 (\$.99 on Kindle). Former pastor Percy Black left the pulpit following a divorce and now dedicates his life to painting and sailing the New England coast, and to a romantic relationship with a feminist therapist and self-professed Wiccan. Their relationship is filled with interesting sexual and religious tension. The couple have befriended Elizabeth, a rugged and independent sailor haunted by her own past and the men who want to do her harm. The suspense and complicated relationships made *Egg Island* a fast and intense read, but I hoped to see more of the title "character," an island off the central Maine coast where an unorthodox psychotherapist ran an asylum for treating sexual disorders in women in the 1920s and 1930s. The island has a small but important role in the story, but its atmospheric setting and creepy back story could have had a more prominent place in the novel. Eberhart is the son of former poet laureate Richard Eberhart and cousin to mystery writer Mignon Eberhart, whose stories appeared in *EQMM* in the 1940s and 1950s.

As always, there are more books to review, but not enough space to include them all. Here are a few highlights of recent mysteries worthy of recommending. Erica Ruth Neubauer's fourth historical whodunit, *Intrigue in Istanbul* (Kensington, \$27.00) sends the globetrotting Jane Wunderly from her home in Boston to the capital of Turkey where her historian father is searching for a relic from the days of Suleiman the Magnificent. Set in 1926, the book contains more than a few nods to Agatha Christie. *Night Flight to Paris* (Soho Crime, \$27.95) is Cara Black's second installment in the excellent series featuring American sharpshooter Kate Rees. Still mourning the loss of her family, Kate is sent by the British Secret Service on a three-pronged mission into Nazi-occupied Paris. *Standing Dead* by Margaret Mizushima (Crooked Lane, \$28.99 HC, \$13.99 e-book) is the eighth of her contemporary Western police procedurals featuring Deputy Mattie Cobb and her K-9 partner, Robo. Mattie travels from Colorado and California to Mexico when her own family is in peril. ● © 2023 by Steve Steinbock