



by Steve Steinbock

When putting together my reviews for The Jury Box, I try to find a common theme linking several of the titles. Sometimes it's a stretch. But this month, the theme practically landed on my lap when I noticed that a majority of the books I'd received for consideration were set throughout Asia. I lead off this column with two recent translations, one from Korean and the other from Japanese. In addition, we have two fascinating books set in wartime, one in Singapore during WWII and the other in Thailand during the Vietnam War. Toward the end of this column, I'll mention a few other noteworthy titles with Asian settings.

***** Gong Ji-Yong, *Togani*, translated from the Korean by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, University of Hawai'i Press, \$21.99. Originally published in Korean in 2009, Gong's novel about the abuse of students at a school for hearing-impaired children led to sweeping legislation to protect the rights of children in Korea. Based on an actual 2005 court case, the novel follows the story of a teacher who discovers sexual abuse perpetrated by the school's principal and a dormitory administrator. This brilliant translation by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton captures the tragedy of the case and the intensity of the trial that followed. Much of the book involves the trial and the stunning way the prosecution is able to identify the culprit. *Togani* has also been adapted into a film (available on Netflix as *Silenced*).

***** Fuminori Nakamura, *The Rope Artist*, translated from the Japanese by Sam Bett, Soho Crime, \$27.95. I've previously found Nakamura's novels to be beautifully insightful. But his writing, often detailing the thin line between obsession and madness, is so darkly depressing that I avoided his last several books. I almost passed on this latest as well, but in the end found it rewarding. *The Rope Artist* concerns a series of deaths connected to Japan's BDSM subculture. Part 1 is told from the perspective of a young police detective, haunted by childhood trauma, who becomes infatuated with a woman suspected in connection with the death of a master of *kinbaku*, the ancient Japanese art of bondage. His obsession with the woman and his loose grasp of reality provide a moving tale of existential noir. The second half of *The Rope Artist*, told from the

perspective of a different detective, brilliant and quirky and equipped with a strong moral compass, reads more like a classic detective novel as he unravels the knots of this mystery and brings it to a satisfying conclusion. Bett's translation brings the writing into clear, natural English without sacrificing tone or style. The most memorable aspect of this book is how, with unflinching clarity, it explores the complex historical, political, spiritual, and psychological elements of this strange erotic art form.

**** Dawn Farnham, *Tokyo Time*, Brash Books, \$18.99. Farnham's first foray into historical crime fiction is a complex police procedural set in Japanese-occupied Singapore during the Second World War. After the British surrender to Japan, Eurasian homicide detective Martin Bach has to tread lightly. But when the body of a young Baghdadi Jewish woman is found in the rubble of an incense shop, he is ordered to find the culprit, as long as it doesn't implicate any Japanese nationals. He finds himself teamed up with Detective Chief Inspector Kano Hayashi, the enigmatic but principled head of the civilian police force. The setting makes for a fascinating police drama as the detectives from two different worlds navigate the many cultures and communities of Singapore.

**** Big Boy Pete, *The Ice Cream Man*, Stark House, \$15.95. I was sceptical of a book called *The Ice Cream Man* by an author calling himself "Big Boy Pete." But a bit of research revealed that "Big Boy Pete" is Peter Miller, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame musician and songwriter influential in psychedelic music starting in the 1960s. *The Ice Cream Man* is set largely in a small village in southern Thailand where a young woman named Kala comes to work for a secretive heroin tycoon named Max. She meets a former CIA operative named Eddie who is working as tour manager for an American rock band touring U.S. military bases. But behind the scenes, Eddie is working to penetrate Max's drug cartel. *The Ice Cream Man* is part rambling adventure and part coming-of-age story, written in a brilliantly fresh and witty style that captures both the quaintness and wisdom of its characters and the complex world of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

***** Martin Edwards, *The Puzzle of Blackstone Lodge*, Poisoned Pen, \$16.99. The village of Blackstone Fell holds many secrets: an abandoned cave dwelling, a dangerous river, a sinister tower, a deadly marsh, an insane asylum on the moors, and two mysterious disappearances. In 1606, a man entered a stone gatehouse, locked the door behind him, and disappeared forever. Three centuries later in 1914, another man entered that same gatehouse and was never seen again. To solve that mystery—among others—Nell Fagan, a journalist with salacious tastes, calls on Rachel Savernake and Jacob Flint for help. The secretive and alluring heroine Rachel Savernake is equal parts Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Moriarty, a woman who will stop at nothing to bring truth to light and serve justice, one way or another. This series, set in 1930s England, is perhaps Edwards's most traditional. In addition to impossible crimes in sinister settings, the story includes a séance denouement. The book includes an appendix which lists clues contained in the book. (No peeking.) Highly recommended.

*** Danielle Trussoni, *The Puzzle Master*, Random House, \$27.00. Mike Brink, an expert cryptographer and puzzle writer, is called to a women's prison to meet with a woman jailed five years earlier for the murder of her

boyfriend. Their encounter launches Brink on a search for a mysterious relic that he thinks may prove the woman's innocence. But his research triggers a conspiracy that may have global implications. *The Puzzle Master* is a book with many moving parts. In addition to the central narrative, there are several epistolary sections. The plot itself includes a French doll maker, a Kabbalistic mandala, a power-hungry billionaire, and a Victorian mansion seemingly haunted by a malevolent doll. While the ideas of the story are intriguing, the parts are often disjointed and the characters lacking in depth.

***** William Burton McCormick, *House of Tigers*, Wildside Press, e-book \$9.99. Frequent *EQMM* contributor McCormick's recent novella is both hilariously witty and culturally insightful. *House of Tigers* might be described as Christie's *And Then There Were None* crossed with "The Most Dangerous Game," set during a plague of deadly mosquitoes. A Russian oligarch and exotic cat breeder invites a corrupt Russian police inspector to his Siberian mansion to assist in the selection of an heir to his criminal empire. Meanwhile, a beautiful Latvian journalist is trapped in a basement cell, and an endless swarm of mosquitos, the result of heavy rain and high temperatures, is covering the Siberian countryside. A fast and entertaining read in which every outlandish detail turns out to be not only fact-based, but also an important clue.

Dozens of other Asian mysteries have been published in recent months, including *Disappearance in Fiji* (Soho Crime, \$25.95) by debut novelist Nilima Rao, a humorous and atmospheric mystery set on the British colonial island in 1914. *The Mistress of Bhatia House* (Soho Crime, \$27.95) by Sujata Massey is the fourth in this award-winning series about Bombay's only female lawyer in the early 1920s. In Brian Klingborg's latest mystery *The Magistrate* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$28.00), Deputy Chief Inspector Lu Fei investigates the targeted assassination of members of the corrupt Nanning Benevolent Society and vigilante strikes against cybersex operations.

For dessert, I offer two new bakery-themed cozies. *Murder Is a Piece of Cake* by Valerie Burns (Kensington Books, \$16.95) is the second of a new series about Maddie Montgomery, a Black woman determined to make a life for herself as a baking video blogger. She has all the skills, except perhaps baking. When a knife from her kitchen is found in the back of an unscrupulous millionaire, Maddie has to think fast or her cake will flop. *A Half-Baked Murder* by Emily George (Kensington Books, \$16.95) is probably the first of its kind: a cozy set at a cannabis cafe. The book includes recipes, but be careful, you may end up hungrier after eating her brownies.

© 2023 by Steve Steinbock