



by Steve Steinbock

In this Jury Box holiday installment, we revisit some old friends and meet new ones in a lineup that demonstrates unique approaches to plot.

***** Gregg Hurwitz, *The Last Orphan*, Minotaur, \$28.99. I discovered Hurwitz's work over a decade ago but made the mistake of skipping his Orphan X series—until now. I knew that the series concerned an assassin trained from childhood as part of an off-the-books project that was subsequently shut down, and since that time, Evan Smoak, known as Orphan X, had become a vigilante. As I was preparing this column, the eighth book in the series practically fell off my shelf and onto my lap. Once I started reading, it was impossible to put down. Despite his great efforts to stay hidden, Evan Smoak is captured and brought to the U.S. President, who offers him a pardon in exchange for assassinating a billionaire mastermind who threatens world order. At first reluctant to help, Smoak agrees when he learns of two young people who were brutally executed after witnessing something at a Labor Day party hosted at the billionaire's private estate. What makes *The Last Orphan* (and the rest of the series) exciting is the way Orphan X uses his wit and training to beat the odds. But what makes the story stand out is the humanity that motivates Evan Smoak and the unique group of friends who assist him. Highly recommended.

***** Mick Herron, *The Secret Hours*, Soho Crime, \$27.95. One of the catch phrases that runs through Herron's Slough House novels is "London rules . . . cover your arse." Herron's new standalone novel is not part of that series (though it includes several characters from it), but it inhabits the same world and embodies that slogan. Two years prior to the main action of the story, a politically motivated inquiry was launched, fishing for acts of misconduct by British Secret Service agents. The inquiry, code-named Monochrome, is eventually shut down, but not before a file from the spring of 1994 surfaces detailing an operation that MI5 would prefer remained hidden. Herron's writing is smart and witty, and the novel is extremely well plotted.

**** Josh Pachter, *Dutch Threat*, Genius Books, \$17.95. University of Michigan history student Jack Farmer is caught off guard when his professor sends him to the Netherlands on a research project. Amsterdam's historic Begijnhof is an

enclosed circle of forty-seven houses inhabited exclusively by older single women. Originally built in the 1300s to house a lay religious community of women, it is less a neighborhood than a residential compound. When Farmer arrives to begin his research, he is immediately smitten with the young nurse of one of Begijnhof's residents, the cantankerous and nosy Mevrouw Moen. When he finds the nurse bending over the dead body of her busybody patient, Farmer gets caught up in a murder investigation. Although Pachter is an accomplished short-story writer and anthologist whose career dates back fifty years, this is his debut novel. *Dutch Threat* is a delightful, witty, fish-out-of-water romance and a rollicking classical whodunit.

**** Melissa Adelman, *What the Neighbors Saw*, Minotaur, \$28.00. Alexis and Sam Crawford have purchased their dream house, a 1927 Cape Cod Revival located inside the Washington, D.C. beltway. As the young couple move in, they set about the headaches of remodeling and the challenge of navigating the social complexities of the neighborhood. Fortunately, Alexis has the help of neighbor Blair Bard. But when Blair's husband is found floating in the Potomac, the police determine it was a homicide, and the neighborhood is caught up in a hornet's nest of suspicion, gossip, and betrayal. Adelman's debut novel is a twisty whodunit told from the alternating points of view of the two housewives.

**** Will Thomas, *Heart of the Nile*, Minotaur, \$27.95. Phillip Addison, a quiet schoolmaster volunteering at the British Museum, makes a shocking discovery while examining a mummy in the museum's collection. When Addison goes missing, private-enquiry agents Thomas Llewelyn and Cyrus Barker set out to help, discovering not only that the schoolmaster was murdered but that his discovery was that the mummy, and the priceless ruby hidden inside it, may have belonged to history's greatest queen. The world of Egyptology and Spiritualism in Victorian London is the backdrop for this entertaining traditional mystery.

**** Lee Goldberg, *Calico*, Severn House, \$31.99. Two hours northeast of Los Angeles, in Barstow, California, a foul-smelling, unkempt man runs across a diner parking lot only to be run over by an oncoming motor home. When Detective Beth McDade arrives to investigate, a number of things don't make sense. The dead man carries no identification, and his clothing looks like something out of a museum. Meanwhile, twelve miles east and 137 years earlier, a stranger arrives in the mining town of Calico calling himself Ben Cartwright. Goldberg interweaves two story lines into a remarkably unconventional crime novel that is warm, thrilling, and fun to read.

**** Nancy Cole Silverman, *Passport to Spy*, Level Best Books, \$16.95. In the second in the Kat Lawson spy series, it's 1999, and Katarina "Kat" Lawson is in Europe working undercover for the FBI as a travel writer, investigating a vast art collection believed to have been stolen by the Nazis during WWII. The FBI has reason to believe that a new Munich art museum may be harboring stolen or forged art works. At great risk to herself, Kat insinuates herself into the art world and the lives of the gallery owners, getting more than she bargained for. The book not only contains fascinating background to the complex historical, legal, and diplomatic aspects of art theft, its portrayal of Bavarian life is vivid.

**** Amnon Kabatchnik, *Courtroom Dramas on the Stage: Volume 1*, Bear-Manor Media, \$45.00 (HC), \$35.00 (TPB), \$9.95 (eBook). Over the years, I've reviewed several volumes of Kabatchnik's encyclopedic *Blood on the Stage*

reference books, including his 2008 work, *Sherlock Holmes on the Stage*. Together, these six massive volumes provide a comprehensive and annotated history of mystery-related plays and theatrical productions. Theater professor and stage director Kabatchnik has now taken on a new project, chronicling the history of courtroom drama. *Volume 1* of the series analyzes over fifty plays that feature trials as a central part of their scripts. He examines the history, plot, adaptations, and famous productions of each play, beginning with ancient Greek plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes. This enlightening and engaging reference book covers centuries of English, French, Indian, and Spanish plays, wrapping up with the 1862 play *East Lynne* by American playwright Clifton W. Tayleure.

**** G.T. Karber, *Murdle: Volume 1*, St. Martin's Griffin, \$31.99. This volume of one hundred mystery puzzles gets the prize for The Jury Box's most unusual book of the year. Blending elements of Encyclopedia Brown, Sudoku puzzles, and the game of Clue®, *Murdle* challenges readers to analyze a set of clues and suspects' statements and use deductive reasoning to identify the killer, the weapon, and the scene of the crime. The book provides puzzle grids and instructions to help solve the mysteries, but they progress in difficulty, with the final fifty requiring identification of motives. My first attempt at solving the puzzles was thwarted by Karber's clever wording of the clues, but once I acquired the knack, I found them fun. A perfect stocking stuffer for the puzzle-loving mystery fan.

Speaking of stocking stuffers, two new whodunits in Donna Andrews's Meg Langslow series come out in time for the holidays. In *Birder, She Wrote* (Minotaur, \$28.00), blacksmith and reluctant birder Meg Langslow deals with beehives, hummingbirds, and a fresh body in an old graveyard. The action of *Let it Crow! Let it Crow! Let it Crow!* (Minotaur, \$27.00) takes place at Christmastime when Meg gets roped into participating in a weapon-smithing contest for a TV production.

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