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by Elizabeth Foxwell

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Readers may find comfort in the familiar conventions of the mystery (such as the disturbed village restored to rights by the case's resolution), but they also can enjoy aspects that deviate from the formula. The selections here offer some atypical elements of interest.

\*\*\*\*\* Sebastian Farr, *Death on the Down Beat: An Orchestral Fantasy of Detection*, British Library Crime Classics, \$14.99. The murder of a philandering and egotistical orchestra conductor during a concert launches this unusual and enthralling mystery, told via letters of a Scotland Yard inspector to his musically savvy wife and featuring items such as an orchestra diagram, musical score excerpts, newspaper accounts, and correspondence from potential suspects (à la Wilkie Collins). Farr was a pseudonym for Eric Walter Blom (1888–1959), a Swiss-born journalist, editor, and musical lexicographer. Sadly, this 1941 novel was the sole mystery outing for Blom, and readers might yearn for an encore from the wry Inspector Hope, with his delicious turns of phrase such as “[n]o man who uses so many superfluous commas can be innocent” (40).

\*\*\*\*\* Helen Nielsen, *Turning the Tables: The Short Stories of Helen Nielsen*, edited and with an introduction by Bill Kelly, Stark House Press, \$17.95. Among the works of the artful Helen Nielsen (1918–2002) are eighteen novels and scripts for TV programs such as *Perry Mason*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and *87th Precinct*. Reflecting the title of this collection that includes six stories first published in *EQMM*, Nielsen provides an accomplished and unexpected take on the unreliable narrator, and, in other stories, establishes disquiet and stages sudden turns in haunting language. “[. . .] Beyond violence is a quiet place where all cries fade to muted whimpers in the mind,” she writes in “Won’t Somebody Help Me?” (189; *EQMM* Jan. 1959).

\*\*\*\* Florence Ryerson and Colin Clements, *Blind Man’s Buff*, introduction by Curtis Evans, Coachwhip Publications, \$21.95. Golden Age elements abound in this Christie-esque mystery by a husband-and-wife team first published in 1933. With a sizable inheritance poised for splitting among squabbling relatives, bodies begin dropping at regular intervals at the family home on an isolated island. A character list, a timetable of events, and

diagrams of the house and grounds help readers and the sleuths—writer Jimmy Lane and his Watson, lawyer Philip Carter—in determining who might have means, motive, and opportunity for the crimes. Gothic/horror elements such as violent storms, reputed hereditary insanity, and ghostly figures flitting around the family tomb, as well as the perpetrator’s written taunts to terrified family members that they may be next, provide fresh and intriguing dimensions to this whodunit. Clements was a playwright, and Ryerson may be best known as a screenwriter on *The Wizard of Oz*, but the Philo Vance-like Lane may be a nod to Ryerson’s collaboration with S.S. Van Dine in adapting some of his works for film.

\*\*\*\* Isabel Ostrander, *The Sleeping Cat*, Coachwhip Publications, \$17.95. The killing of a woman celebrated for her World War I relief work poses conundrums for vacationing Daniel Rider, the NYC special deputy police commissioner, in Isabel Ostrander’s subversive mystery first published in 1926 (two years after Ostrander’s death). Gloria Warrender’s visit to her old friend Olive Mercer’s placid small town exposes PTSD (in male veterans as well as Gloria), forbidden love, and jealousy, setting murder in motion. Unlike other Golden Age writers employing gifted amateurs and professional investigators to tie up their case in a neat package and restore their sleepy societies, Ostrander shows that the impact of a meddling know-it-all and the crime is messy, tragic, and irrevocable. This thought-provoking novel caps an extensive mystery career in which Ostrander, among her contributions, created one of the first blind sleuths.

\*\*\*\* Joan Cockin, *Curiosity Killed the Cat*, Galileo Publishers, £10.99. The murder of an energetic blackmailer, potential industrial espionage, and a trampled vegetable garden are the main problems for Inspector Bob Cam in this skillful mystery originally published in 1949. Its English-village setting may seem prototypical at first, but it seethes with resentments: of residents toward a WWII scientific agency still imposed on them in a postwar world and of the agency’s personnel, who find few amusements in their off hours. Cockin, aka British diplomat Edith Joan Burbidge Macintosh (1919–2014), offers unexpected love stories, a new approach to the “gathering of the suspects” scenario, and adroit misdirection of the reader to the end.

\*\*\* R.M. Laurenson, *The Railroad Murder Case*, Coachwhip Publications, \$16.95. When the body of Chicago-bound railroad company president Richards is found outside his private railroad car, the company’s chief lawyer Marc Jordan turns sleuth, examining the activities of Richards’s floozy neighbor and her associates, passengers, and staff, as well as thwarting the attempted coercion of suspects by the irascible police detective. Unlike other mysteries set on the rails that focus largely on well-heeled passengers, readers are treated here to behind-the-scenes railway operations that reflect various classes, as the author was a railroad engineer and company communications professional. The rendering of an African American servant may cause some discomfort to modern sensibilities, but the other characters treat him with respect. Writing this book in the 1940s after reading a poorly composed mystery, R.M. Laurenson (1906–82) proves himself a capable author.

\*\*\* Lorenz Heller, *Pulp Champagne: The Short Fiction of Lorenz Heller*, introduction by Bill Kelly, Stark House Press, \$15.95. Former New Jersey journalist Lorenz Heller (1910–65) may have written in the tough-guy school of

detective fiction, but, as this collection demonstrates, his stories captivate with uncommon features and locales for the pulps' "kiss kiss bang bang" milieu. In "Criminal at Large," the twelve-year-old narrator describes the menace of a criminal bent on revenge against his uncle and his aunt's hard choices. "Forger's Fate" takes the form of a witness statement, including entertaining insults directed at a nearby police officer. The language, too, has its unanticipated pleasures. "Marmot had come in as if walking hand in hand with fear, and terror only a step behind," Heller writes in "A Time for Dying" (102).

\*\*\* Edward D. Hoch, *The Killer Everyone Knew and Other Captain Leopold Stories*, preface by Roland Lacourbe, Crippen and Landru, \$22. The many characters of Edward D. Hoch's long-running short stories for *EQMM* include the wise Captain Jules Leopold, head of the Violent Crimes Squad for the Monroe, CT, police force. In this collection that may appeal to fans of brain teasers, Captain Leopold often faces seemingly impossible situations such as in "Captain Leopold Beats the Machine," when he must figure out how a criminal died while in the secure company of police officers and his attorney.

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