



by Steve Steinbock

Season's Greetings from The Jury Box. When I choose which books to review, my natural inclination is to reach for familiar titles by favorite authors. This time around, however, without intending to, I've reviewed in this column mostly books by authors whose works I've never read before. The first four titles in our lineup each contain stories set in parallel time lines where the past has lethal impact on the present.

***** Kristen Perrin, *How to Solve Your Own Murder*, Dutton, \$28.00. At a county fair in 1965, teenager Frances Adams receives a cryptic prediction from a fortune teller foretelling her own murder. For the next sixty years, solving a murder that hasn't happened becomes her personal obsession. In present day, London-based novelist wannabe Annie Adams is summoned to Dorset for a meeting with her Great-aunt Frances to discuss her responsibilities as beneficiary of her great-aunt's estate. Before the meeting can take place, the old woman dies under suspicious circumstances. As the narrative alternates between Frances's journal entries from the 1960s and Annie's visit to the village of Castle Knoll, Annie strives to solve her great-aunt's murder before she becomes the next victim. A well-paced and cleverly plotted mystery, and a moving story of a young woman learning about the life of a relative she never met.

***** Baron Birtcher, *Knife River*, Open Road, \$35.99 (HC), \$19.99 (TPB), \$9.95 (ebook). Cattle rancher and Korean War veteran Ty Dawson serves as sheriff of southern Oregon's Meriwether County in 1976. While following up a report of poachers using helicopters to hunt eagles, Dawson visits a local recording studio where he meets singer-songwriter Ian Swann. Dawson's daughter, home for spring break from college, is a huge fan of the musician, and along with Dawson's wife goes to work on the production team for the filming of a live concert. But things turn violent when locals begin harassing the musician. Flashback segments from twelve years earlier tell of the death of a local high school girl and its subsequent cover-up. Reading Birtcher's work for the first time, I found *Knife River* to be riveting, beautifully written, and emotionally rich.

***** Shaina Steinberg, *Under the Paper Moon*, Kensington, \$27.00. Set in Los Angeles in 1948 and Europe during WWII, *Under the Paper Moon*

is a mystery, a spy story, and the tale of a complex love triangle. During the war, Evelyn Bishop, daughter of an American aeronautics tycoon, is working undercover for the British in Nazi-occupied Europe where she meets and falls in love with Nick Gallagher. The war didn't end well for the couple and they went their separate ways. When they run into each other again at a Los Angeles nightclub, Evelyn is working as a P.I. and her quarry happens to be the man Nick works for. This book marks the fiction debut for Steinberg, but her screenwriting background is evident in the strong cinematic feel to the book.

**** Andromeda Romano-Lax, *The Deepest Lake*, Soho Crime, \$26.95. Traveling to central America, a grieving mother goes undercover at an elite women's writing retreat to learn the truth of her daughter's death. For years, twenty-something Jules had been a fan of memoir writer Eva Marshall, so she was ecstatic to land a job as her personal assistant at the Guatemala-based retreat where Eva leads exclusive women's writing workshops. But when Jules's mother Rose learns of her daughter's drowning in Lake Atitlán, she suspects that the drowning was no accident. Told primarily from the mother's point of view, the story is interspersed with Jules's journal entries. *The Deepest Lake* is a piercing look at obsession and grief and a vivid portrayal of the Guatemalan landscape and the sometimes-toxic culture created by charismatic leaders.

**** Margaret Mizushima, *Gathering Mist*, Crooked Lane, \$29.99. Colorado-based K-9 Search and Rescue handler Deputy Mattie Wray is in the final preparations for her wedding when she and her German Shepherd Robo are summoned to Washington State's Olympic Peninsula where the nine-year-old son of a high-profile actress has gone missing. The search is hampered by combative locals, conflict between the missing child's parents, and several cases of arsenic poisoning. As the search intensifies, Mattie's veterinarian fiancé Cole flies up to help. The police-procedural details, particularly the K-9 handling elements, are fascinating without being overbearing and lend an air of authenticity to Mizushima's writing.

**** Heather Redmond, *Death and the Visitors*, Kensington, \$27.00. Based on the lives of historical figures, *Death and the Visitors* follows the adventurous capers of stepsisters Jane Clairmont and Mary Godwin as they attempt to catch a murderer. The story is set as world leaders are preparing for the 1814 Congress of Vienna, and two years before Mary elopes with poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and goes on to write the novel *Frankenstein*. The "visitors" of the title are the Polish princess Maria Naryshkina along with her Russian husband and brother-in-law, who have promised a quantity of diamonds to Mary's father, anarchist philosopher and publisher William Godwin. When the brother-in-law is killed and the diamonds go missing, the two stepsisters, with the help of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, try to solve the case while scandalizing London. *Death and the Visitors* is a mystery, an adventure, and a novel of manners—or perhaps ill manners. The narrative is lively and witty with the feel of a Jane Austen novel except with a dysfunctional family and plenty of hijinks.

**** Amnon Tabatchnik, *Murder in the West End, volume 1: The Plays of Agatha Christie and Her Disciples*, Bear Manor Media, \$49.00 (HC), \$38.00 (TPB). A new addition to the encyclopedic works of the professor and historian of theater is this new work detailing over 100 plays that appeared in London's West End theater district from 1929 to 1955. The book opens with summaries and production details of eight crime dramas written by Edgar Wallace as well as additional

plays and film adaptations of Wallace's novels. Tabatchnik then looks at twenty-two plays by Agatha Christie, beginning with *Black Coffee* which premiered in 1931 and features Hercule Poirot. Christie's *Mousetrap* (1952), which began as a 1947 radio drama, holds the world's record for longest-running play in theater history with more than 29,500 performances at the West End. The remainder of the book covers sixty-six plays written by luminaries including W. Somerset Maugham, A.A. Milne, and J.B. Priestly. There is a 1926 adaptation of Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Dorothy Sayers's own adaptation of her novel *Busman's Honeymoon*, Daphne Du Maurier's adaptation of *Rebecca*, and Aldous Huxley's classic *The Gioconda Smile*. Tabatchnik's writing is highly readable and entertaining, filled with extensive background notes, details about cast members and productions and later adaptations.

Also new from Tabatchnik is *Courtroom Dramas on the Stage, volume II* (Bear Manor Media, \$35.00) which covers ninety-two plays produced between 1900 and 2022, including Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* as well as numerous plays that were later adapted for the screen including *Inherit the Wind*, *Compulsion*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and *Agnes of God*.

Wrapping things up, two new short-story anthologies recently came across my desk, both with clever themes, clever titles, and even more clever contents. *Crimes Against Nature: New Stories of Environmental Villainy* (edited by Robert Lopresti, Down & Out Books) features fourteen ecological crime stories by Michael Bracken, S.J. Rozan, Janice Law, Josh Pachter, R.T. Lawton, Barb Goffman, Gary Phillips, and others. The contributors have put their money where their mouths are by donating half of all royalties to environmentally focused nonprofit organizations of their choosing, with each story followed by a short description by the authors of their chosen charity.

And just in time for the holidays, *Eight Very Bad Nights: A Collection of Hanukkah Noir* (edited by Tod Goldberg, Soho Crime, \$27.95) contains eleven hardboiled stories with Hanukkah themes and settings. The stories range in tone from Lee Goldberg's witty "If I Were a Rich Man" to David L. Ulin's poignant "The Shamash." The Festival of Lights has never been so dark.

And with that, happy reading until we meet again next year.

© 2024 by Steve Steinbock