



by Steve Steinbock

The word “pastiche” is commonly understood as an imitation of another author’s creation. It comes from the Latin word for pie (*pasticium*), from which we also get such words as “pastry,” “pasta,” and “paste.” A pastiche is a literary collage, a pasting together of elements from one source used as ingredients to create a new one. Two novels that recently landed on my desk deserve attention for their effective blending of characters, styles, and clues in ways that celebrate their sources.

***** S.J. Rozan and John Shen Yen Nee, *The Murder of Mr. Ma*, Soho Crime, \$25.95. A Chinatown shopkeeper in post-WWI London has been murdered, but the police dismiss it as a squabble between foreign gangs. Chinese diplomat Dee Ren Jie, known popularly as Judge Dee, teams up with novelist and academic Lao She to get to the bottom of a larger conspiracy. Dee and Lao are natural stand-ins for Holmes and Watson. In fact, all four characters appeared together in the pages of *EQMM* in Rozan and Nee’s “The Killing of Henry Davenport” (Jan/Feb 2023). Unlike Holmes and Watson, Dee and Lao were actual historical figures. Lao (1899-1966) was a Chinese novelist and taught at the University of London during the 1920s. The real Judge Dee lived 1,200 years earlier, during the Tang Dynasty, and was the subject of Chinese detective stories for several centuries, as well as a popular English-language series by Robert van Gulik. The team-up of the great detective Judge Dee with Lao as his “Watson” is ingenious. Central to the plot is Britain’s Chinese Labour Corps, the 100,000 Chinese men who were enlisted by England to provide support for the army during World War I. The story also incorporates a number of other historical figures, most notably the philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell. *The Murder of Mr. Ma* is the first of a projected series featuring Judge Dee and Lao She.

***** Kemper Donovan, *The Busy Body*, Kensington, \$27.00. Following her unsuccessful bid for the White House, former U.S. congresswoman Dorothy Chase Gibson has hired a ghostwriter to move into her Maine estate and help her write her memoir. Ghostwriters are intended to be invisible collaborators, but although unnamed throughout the novel, the ghostwriter narrator of *The Busy Body* is anything but invisible. When Gibson’s eccentric neighbor dies of

an apparent suicide, the ghostwriter joins Gibson in the role of amateur sleuth. Author Donovan is the host of the *All About Agatha* podcast, which analyzes the works of Agatha Christie. The plot of *The Busy Body* demonstrates Christie's influence, but Gibson and her ghostwriter struck me as a perfect re-envisioning of Rex Stout's characters Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. Whether or not Donovan intended that parallel, *The Busy Body* reflects her knowledge and appreciation of the mystery genre as a whole.

**** Jon Lindstrom, *Hollywood Hustle*, Crooked Lane, \$29.99. Actor Winston Greene's once successful career on film and TV is long gone. A drinking problem, the death of his wife, and a serious medical condition have left Win with barely enough to get by. But his world is turned upside down when his six-year-old granddaughter shows up at his house holding a thumb drive containing a ransom demand for the return of his daughter. The kidnappers assume that the former film star is loaded, but Winston has few resources aside from his friends. This a thrilling debut by the Emmy-nominated star of *General Hospital*.

***** Lee Goldberg, *Dream Town*, Thomas & Mercer, \$28.99. Detective Eve Ronin never wanted to be in the limelight, but while she investigates the murder of a reality TV star, her own meteoric police career is being adapted as a television series. Multiple plots interweave in this thoughtful police procedural that tests the boundaries between television and reality. Also new from Lee Goldberg is *Crown Vic* (Cutting Edge Books, \$9.99 paperback, \$2.99 e-book), containing two never-before-published hardboiled short stories featuring ex-con Ray Boyd. They're a fun departure for Goldberg and a throwback to the thrilling and erotic men's adventure novels of the 1970s.

**** Mark Coggins, *Geisha Confidential*, Down & Out, \$18.95. San Francisco P.I. August Riordan flies to Tokyo at the request of Coco Ono—a successful transgender bar hostess and former lover of Riordan's late best friend—who believes her life is in danger. Riordan finds himself dodging Yakuza gangsters, inspecting a crypto-currency scam, and bumping elbows with sumo wrestlers, porn stars, a beautiful Chinese pathologist, and an illegal surgical enterprise that I'll leave up to readers to discover for themselves.

**** Melissa Yi, *Sugar and Vice*, Windtree Press, \$4.99 e-book. Dr. Hope Sze, hero of nine previous novels, has now appeared in two books in a spin-off series in which she confronts each of the seven deadly sins. The newest book by the Derringer Award winning author (for "My Two-Legs" from the September/October 2022 issue of *AHMM*) takes Hope and her friends to Montreal's first Dragon Boat Race and Food Festival. The book is an all-you-can-eat celebration of action, deception, and food puns, bringing together modern social media with bits of historical and culinary trivia to create a clever cryptographic murder mystery.

***** John Shepphird, *Deception Specialist*, Down & Out Books, print \$19, e-book \$5.99. Reformed conman Jack O'Shea now makes a living as a "Deception Specialist," a P.I. who helps people uncover the types of scams he once committed against others. Three years ago, Jack was in an accident that left the love of his life dead and his face disfigured. Now, still healing, he's helping out a woman in central California whose husband fell—or was pushed—down a mine shaft. The story of his investigation of a town mired in corruption is interspersed with flashbacks from the days leading up to his tragic accident.

The character Jack O'Shea appeared in three stories published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* (beginning with "Ghost Negligence," July/ August 2012, which earned a Shamus Award). Shepphird's background as a Hollywood writer and director shows in his tight dialogue and perfect plotting.

**** Michael Bracken, editor, *Prohibition Peepers, Down & Out*, \$20.00. This notable new collection of P.I. short stories set during the 1920s and 30s includes tales by *EQMM* authors David Dean, John M. Floyd, Richard Helms, Stacy Woodson, Joseph S. Walker, Nils Gilbertson, Leigh Lundin, and more.

***** Nathanael T. Booth, *God and the Great Detective: Ellery Queen's Struggle with the Divine, 1945-1965*, McFarland, \$65.00 trade paperback, \$39.99 e-book. Booth's study of the Ellery Queen novels published between 1945 and 1965 takes an in-depth look at how they represent an existential response to the horrors of WWII, an exploration of gender and masculinity, and, on a metaphysical level, a struggle with and against a deity both real and symbolic. In addition to being a thoughtful revisiting of the Queen canon, the book examines the nature of fiction in general, classical detective fiction in particular, and what it can tell us about the nature of reality.

I'll close with a couple items of international news. Previously I've reviewed several books by a trio of Japanese mystery fans calling themselves The Talkative Middles. In addition to discussions of the plots of novels by selected writers, most notably John Dickson Carr, their books include clever comic strips and highly detailed crime-scene maps and diagrams designed by member "Cuckoo" Morisaki. The latest title, *Murder, She Drew Vol. 4*, covers twelve novels by Detection Club cofounder Anthony Berkeley Cox (1893-1970), including *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, *The Piccadilly Murder*, and *Trial and Error*. While most of the text is in Japanese, the maps and diagrams include English notations. Interested readers can contact Moriwaki Akira at tao-owl@jcom.home.ne.jp.

Chinese writer and Ellery Queen fan Ma Tien (author of "The Japanese Armor Mystery" in *The Further Misadventures of Ellery Queen*) brought to my attention an exhibition held in Shanghai last September. Called *Challenge from the Detective: Ellery Queen and Detective Fiction Treasures*, it traced the history of English-language mystery fiction from Sherlock Holmes through the Golden Age of detective fiction, with a focus on the influence of Ellery Queen. The event was curated by several Ellery Queen collectors, experts, and translators, including Liu Zhen and Han Dong. More than 170 items were displayed, including signed first editions, a magazine containing a 1936 serialized Chinese translation of *The Roman Hat Mystery*, and various handwritten manuscripts. © 2024 by Steve Steinbock