



by Steve Steinbock

People often ask how I choose the books I review. I'm not sure. Sometimes I think the books choose me. I'm also asked how I review books I don't like. The answer is, I don't. With hundreds of new mysteries published each month, life is too short to read a book I don't enjoy, let alone criticize it in print, so I write very few negative reviews. A four-star review in my columns is a solid mystery. A book that's good, but still falls short in various ways, will get a rare three-star review. Books that surpass my expectations—books that are unique, moving, beautifully written, and surprising—get five stars.

This installment of *The Jury Box* includes some titles by familiar authors as well as a few I'm reading for the first time. The first book in our lineup is a major departure by an author well established in the private-eye genre.

***** Kenneth Wishnia, *From Sun to Sun*, PM Press, \$19.95. Wishnia's new standalone novel follows two strong female heroes separated by thousands of years, trying to solve crimes while seen as outsiders by those around them. In contemporary New York, Felicity Ortega Pérez is hired by a private-security firm to locate a former employee who disappeared after allegedly looting artifacts, including an ancient Hebrew scroll, from Iraq. Meanwhile 2,500 years earlier, a young "foreign" woman named Ruth is traveling with the Judean exiles, determined to learn the identity of her husband's killer as she tries to find acceptance by her adopted people. The two stories form a compelling parallel narrative. The modern sections highlight Felicity's progressive, revolutionary worldview as she's thrown into a world of Bible-misquoting, mercenary defense contractors, while the chapters set in the ancient Middle East portray the return of Judean exiles at a time of political conflict within the Israelite community. The historical portions of *From Sun to Sun* provide a radical but historically plausible retelling of the story of the biblical Book of Ruth containing well-researched, thoughtful, and honest portrayals of a world quite different from our own.

***** Catherine Mack, *Every Time I Go on Vacation, Someone Dies*, Minotaur, \$28.00. For ten years, Eleanor Dash has been a best-selling author of vacation-themed mysteries. Her one mistake was using her one-time lover, Connor

Smith, as the hero of her books. Since her debut, the real Connor has been blackmailing her, demanding twenty percent of her royalties and tagging along on her publicity events, including her current anniversary tour for *When in Rome*. Eleanor longs to kill off the fictional Connor, but as the tour progresses, someone is trying to kill Connor, or possibly Eleanor, or both. Filled with detective-fiction lore, a twisted plot, and hilarious footnotes, *Every Time I Go on Vacation* is a scenic insider's view of the life of a mystery writer.

***** Libby Fischer Hellmann, *Max's War*, The Red Herrings Press, \$21.99. Part espionage story and part coming-of-age war saga, *Max's War* follows the life of a teenage boy in 1930s Germany facing love, loss, and the rise of Nazi antisemitism. As a Jewish schoolboy in the German town of Regensburg in the early 1930s, Max Steiner faces bullying from his classmates and teachers. He witnesses the boycotting, vandalism, and looting of Jewish businesses and the arrest of his father. The family ultimately escapes to Amsterdam where, as Nazism spreads through Europe, Max begins working with the Resistance. When Hitler invades Holland, Max immigrates to Chicago where, upon learning of his parents' fate in Sobibor extermination camp, he enlists in the U.S. army and trains as a spy at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. Filled with vivid, well-researched details, *Max's War* is a poignantly thrilling and inspiring tale of courage.

**** Gigi Pandian, *A Midnight Puzzle*, Minotaur Books, \$28.00. Blending cozy sensibilities with sleight-of-hand storytelling, this is the third in the Secret Staircase series featuring Tempest, a disgraced stage magician trying to rebuild her reputation while working for her family's construction design company and looking for answers to the disappearance of her mother five years earlier. A litigious former client is killed by a booby-trapped theater door. When the booby trap seems to regenerate on its own, rumors begin to surface that the ghost of Tempest's mother may be seeking revenge. Further incidents lead to a theatrical denouement in which Tempest reveals whether the deaths are caused by supernatural agency or human malice.

**** Akira Otani, *The Night of Baba Yaga*, Soho Crime, \$27.95. (Translation by Sam Bett.) A stocky, powerful, street-fighting woman from northern Japan is forced to work as the bodyguard for the fragile but petulant eighteen-year-old daughter of a Yakuza mob boss. Yoriko Shindo, with her masculine build and reddish hair, has always been an outsider. While employed at the Tokyo household of Genzo Naiki, she is despised by Genzo's men and resented by Genzo's daughter, Shoko. Slowly, the two women develop an alliance until an unexpected violent turn of events sends both of their lives in a new direction. Filled with visceral action and unexpected twists, *The Night of Baba Yaga* manages to be both brutal and touching, and at times subtly funny. Author Akira Otani's English-language debut is a shocking work of Japanese noir that I found difficult to put down.

Next up are two new novels that each feature a killer-for-hire as protagonist.

**** Rob Hart, *Assassins Anonymous*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$28.00. Mark is a contract killer who walked away from his old life one year ago with a sizable nest egg and a desire to go straight. He is befriended by a former Yakuza hitman who sponsors him in a twelve-step program for reformed assassins. But Mark learns the hard way that a life without killing doesn't come easy for a

killer, especially when someone from your past is trying to get even. *Assassins Anonymous* is a witty, thoughtful, and oddly redemptive bloodbath from the author of *The Warehouse* and *Paradox Hotel*.

**** Keith Bruton, *Murder on the Dodder*, Brash Books, \$18.99. Patrick Callen, the bicycle-riding hitman introduced in *The Lemon Man* (Brash Books, 2022), is back. The murder referred to in the title is one of the many antics Patrick finds himself involved in. When his friend and mentor is kidnapped, Patrick is given until midnight to find a man named Lorcan Doyle, kill him, and throw his body in the River Dodder. As Patrick pedals his bicycle across Dublin, his biggest concern isn't his next kill, it's how long he can keep his secret from his girlfriend. There is nothing inherently funny about killers for hire, in fact, quite the contrary. But what makes Bruton's writing so entertaining is the banality with which Patrick's life goes on, struggling like the rest of us to tick off all the items on his to-do list while trying to stay alive in this rollicking travelogue of Dublin, Ireland.

**** Juan Gómez-Jurado, *Black Wolf*, Minotaur, \$28.00. (Translation by Nick Caistor and Lorenzo Garcia). After reviewing Gómez-Jurado's *Red Queen* last year (*EQMM*, May/June 2023), I was eager for the Amazon Prime Spanish-language adaptation featuring reclusive police operative Antonia Scott and her companion and handler Inspector Jon Gutiérrez. The TV series is highly recommended, as is the newly translated second book in the series. The "Black Wolf" of the title is an assassin searching for the pregnant wife of a Russian mobster. It's up to Jon and Antonia to find her first, but the Wolf and the Red Queen aren't the only ones on her tail.

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