



## THE JURY BOX

by Steve Steinbock

**I**t's coming up on the holiday season: a good time to celebrate the authors who bring readers pleasure, insight, and entertainment through the ratiocinative workings of detective fiction. In this installment of The Jury Box, I'll share with you several new works of crime and detection starting with works by two favorites. I'm also including two books that feature librarians who get caught in sticky situations.

Ragnar Jónasson, *The Mysterious Case of the Missing Crime Writer*, Minotaur, \$29.00. Icelandic author Jónasson is the cofounder of the Iceland Noir festival and is known for his dark suspense novels. But Jónasson is also a fan of traditional mysteries, the translator of fourteen Agatha Christie novels, and an authority on classical detection. His latest novel is both a traditionally plotted thriller and a celebration of classical detection filled with references to the works of S.S. Van Dine, Agatha Christie, Anthony Berkeley, and John Dickson Carr. Loosely inspired by Christie's own eleven-day disappearance in 1926, it's the story of a young detective's investigation into the disappearance of a famous crime writer. Told in news reports, interviews, and standard narration, the story jumps back and forth in time, spanning almost fifty years. One of the subplots involves Hulda Hermannsdóttir, the hero of Jónasson's 2018 novel *The Darkness* (now a SkyShowtime series starring Lena Olin). *The Mysterious Case of the Missing Crime Writer* is a fast-moving, well-told mystery and hopefully the first in a new series.

Peter Lovesey, *Against the Grain*, Soho Crime, \$28.95. Last spring, the mystery world lost one of its shining stars when Peter Lovesey passed away. The first book of Lovesey's that I read, more than thirty years ago, was *Rough Cider* (1986), in which a human skull is found inside a cider barrel. Lovesey used a similar device in his final novel, the twenty-second in the Detective Peter Diamond series, *Against the Grain*, which begins with a corpse discovered in a grain silo. Bath police detective Peter Diamond is taking a busman's holiday, visiting his retired former deputy Julie Hargreaves in the Somerset village of Baskerville. Julie, who has lost her sight due to macular degeneration, believes that the arrest of a local dairy farm owner is a miscarriage of justice. Since inheriting her father's farm, dairy owner Claudia Priest had been hosting wild parties that made her unpopular with the locals. At one of her parties, Claudia's jilted ex-lover is tricked into hunting for a ladies' garter in a silo where he suffocated under tons of grain. (Continued page 39)

"You talked in that weird voice," I said. "Like you were Haugen, accusing Royal of killing him."

"Did I?" Crapster said. "How curious."

"Come on. You put on the whole thing, right?"

"Who's to say?" he said. "The universe only employs me as its vessel."

"Balls," I said.

"I remain amused at your continued refusal to acknowledge my gifts," Crapster said, without a hint of irritation. "Especially when they are so

often used for your benefit. According to Spencer Beekman, there is an excellent cigar-and-martini bar on the third floor. I may repair there to ice down the bruises you have inflicted on my ego."

"It's been a long day. One nice thing about being the boss: Other people can handle the paperwork. I may join you."

"I had a premonition you were going to say that," Crapster said.

"Yeah," I said. "Sure you did." ●

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**THE JURY BOX (Continued from page 20)** As Claudia sits in prison accused of manslaughter, Peter Diamond tries to learn what actually happened. *Against the Grain* is the twenty-second and final book in the Peter Diamond series, told with attention to plot, humor, and humanity, as well as being a lovely portrait of Bath and rural Somerset.

Sherry Thomas, *The Librarians*, Berkley, \$30.00. Four librarians at a branch library in Austin, Texas each hold personal secrets that they are desperate to protect. But in the aftermath of a Halloween game night, two library visitors are found dead, both from a fentanyl overdose. As police begin questioning the library staff, the four librarians scramble to solve the murders before their own secrets can be exposed. *The Librarians* has a large cast of characters with many moving parts and unexpected interconnections, making it at times hard to keep track. Crime and mystery play a large role in the plot, but *The Librarians* is ultimately a story about friendship and love by the author of the Lady Sherlock mysteries.

Anna Scotti, *It's Not Even Past*, Down & Out Books, \$20.00. She was called Juliette Gregory when she worked as a tutor and chauffeur to the daughters of a wealthy widower in Billings, Montana. She was known as Audrey Smith when she did a stint at a nursing home, and in Tallahassee she was called Serena. She was listed as Sonia Sutton when she managed a run-down rental property in South Carolina. Mostly she's known as Cam Baker, which is also not her real name. She had been a doctoral student in library science when her fiancé—who unbeknownst to her was leader of a drug cartel—killed her best friend and forced Cam/Audrey/Serena/Juliette into witness protection. *It's Not Even Past* is a collection of eleven stories about the "librarian on the run" (nine of which first appeared in *EQMM*). The stories take Cam across the country and into a variety of odd jobs, all the time making friends and touching people's lives in positive ways, quoting Shakespeare, and solving murders. (Continued page 87)

**THE JURY BOX (Cont. from p. 39)** Melodie Campbell, *The Silent Film Star Murders*, Cormorant Books, \$24.95. Canada's reigning queen of comedic crime fiction is back with her second book featuring the merry-widow heroine Lucy Revelstoke. It's 1928, and Lucy, the daughter of a Canadian mobster and widow of a young English lord, is now owner of the Empire Line of cruise ships. As the book opens, the ship *Victoriana* is departing Southampton on its journey to New York when Lucy and her diminutive maid Elf (Elfreda, a foul-mouthed former pick-pocket) see the glamorous movie star Renata Harwood coming aboard with her entourage. The ship is barely at sea when the movie star's sister goes missing. Egos, rivalries, and raging hormones flare before a member of the crew is murdered. Filled with humor and warm nostalgia, *The Silent Film Star Murders* has the feel of Christie-meets-Wodehouse aboard a transatlantic ocean liner.

Cathy Ace, *The Case of the Unfortunate Fortune Teller*, Four Tails Publishing Ltd., e-book, \$3.99. With Christmas approaching, the ladies of the W.I.S.E. Enquiries Agency (W.I.S.E. for Welsh, Irish, Scottish, and English) have a new client, a fortune teller who believes someone is systematically sabotaging her life. Pauline Thomas has been the target of mass online negative reviews and a series of physical attacks meant to look like accidents. But the ladies of the W.I.S.E. Agency suspect that their client isn't being completely upfront, a fact that becomes more significant when another woman turns up dead near the fortune teller's houseboat. Meanwhile the village of Anwen-by-Wye is gearing up for a holiday pageant, and a London actor has been hired to direct an adaptation of Mother Goose. Then there's the matter of personal items being stolen all over town. As always, Ace's writing is entertaining and charming, her characters and setting a perfect treat for lovers of cozy countryside mysteries.

Melissa Yi, *The Red Rock Killer*, Olo Books, \$24.99. Emergency room physician by day, Melissa Yi has published dozens of novels, including nine featuring a Quebec emergency-physician sleuth Hope Sze. Her short story "The Longest Night of the Year" (published in the November/December 2024 issue of *EQMM*) is on the 2025 shortlist for Best Crime Short Story by Crime Writers of Canada. This cozy YA mystery, set in Las Vegas, is narrated by thirteen-year-old Edan Sze (a hitherto unknown cousin of Dr. Hope Sze). On a hike at Red Rock Canyon, Edan along with her best friends Callie and Barstow discover a strange barrel hidden among the trees. When the police investigate, the body of their middle-school principal is found inside, starting the three teens on a quest to find the killer. Also, just in from Melissa Yi is *Killing Me Slothly* (Windtree Press, \$5.99 e-book), the third in her Hope's Seven Deadly Sins series. While doing a neurology rotation, Dr. Sze comes face-to-face with a horror that may be a manifestation from H.P. Lovecraft's tales of the supernatural.

Curtis Evans, *Nothing Darker Than the Night: Essays on Hard-Boiled & Noir Crime Fiction*, Stark House, \$21.95. Historian, blogger, and mystery aficionado Curtis Evans (*Masters of the "Humdrum" Mystery and Murder in the Closet*) has assembled forty-eight essays from his *The Passing Tramp* blog and elsewhere—all dealing with classic noir and hardboiled authors and their works. I associate Evans mainly with traditional British crime fiction, but his insights on darker, predominantly American crime fiction are erudite and provide unique insights into the writers and their works. The book opens with six essays dealing with Dashiell Hammett and his work, then moves on to articles about Raymond Chandler, Ross Macdonald, Cornell Woolrich, Fredric Brown, Patricia Highsmith, Margaret Millar, and many others. ● © 2025 by Steve Steinbock