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Mysteries

In these crime novels, it's still a man's world.

By Kevin Allman
Sunday, December 17, 2006; BW13

Back when P.I. mysteries were a guys-only club, manhood was usually defined by a gumshoe's facility in using his fists, his wits and his gun . . . among other things. Later, when Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller and Sara Paretsky broke down the gender barrier in crime fiction, the Mike Hammers of the world became anachronisms. This month, five novels of various times and places explore the notion of manhood: The boys are back in town.

Storied Storyville

Redemption (Harcourt, \$24), historian Frederick Turner's evocation of New Orleans's Storyville District circa 1913, introduces Francis "Fast-Mail" Muldoon -- former cop and long-distance runner, now crippled from a race-war shootout. He's become the right-hand man of Tom Anderson, the "Mayor of Storyville," making nightly checkups on Anderson's saloons and brothels and collecting the keys from Anderson's "crib girls" at dawn's light. Muldoon is a shambling shell, long accustomed to the ugly reality of Storyville; as Anderson puts it, "Muldoon don't have much of a mind. He's kinda like a clock or a watch, maybe -- something you wind up." Two incidents upset Muldoon's clockwork: the arrival from New York of the ruthless Parker brothers, who intend to topple Anderson's gaudy empire, and a meeting with Adele, a singer whose purity manages to shine through the haze of cigar smoke and curses at the Parkers' new dance hall.

Anderson is only one of the historical figures in *Redemption*; Turner also includes the great jazz innovator and "piano professor" Tony Jackson, as well as Storyville photographer E.J. Bellocq. Lavishing his story with period detail and some extraordinary writing, Turner evokes Storyville in spectacular fashion: "The way things were supposed to run in the cauldron that was the District was at a steady, rolling boil, one that kept the customers coming but that never bubbled over the cauldron's black, encrusted rim." At *Redemption*'s end, of course, the cauldron does boil over, and Turner sets the stage for a war between the good, the bad and the ugly, in a setting that's less spaghetti Western than gumbo Western.

The Weird Blue Line

"The days of LAPD rock 'n' rule are over. It's never coming back," laments a cop in Joseph Wambaugh's *Hollywood Station* (Little, Brown, \$24.99). Much has changed in the Los Angeles police department in the three decades since the author's landmark novel, *The Choirboys*. This LAPD is far more diverse, but all of Wambaugh's trademark jet-black humor is intact in the post-Rodney King era, where low budgets, federal oversight and absurdly PC regulations are bigger threats to the force than the freaks from the neon-slime netherworld of nocturnal Hollywood.

There's a plot here about the scourges of identity theft and crystal meth, but the backbone of *Hollywood Station* is a highly entertaining collection of macho (and macha) police stories that are too outrageous and hilarious not to be true, probably having been swapped among real officers over rounds of after-shift Budweisers.

Wambaugh's cops are sharply defined character sketches, from the aging hunk determined to break into the movies to the Japanese-American officer of small stature and great courage. One big exception is the pair of spacey surfer cops whose slangy dialogue seems beamed in from an updated episode of "Gidget": "Your display is on screen-saver, dude. Get the hard drive buzzing and stay real"; their

Heckle-and-Jeckle routine gets tired from the first chapter. But Wambaugh's anecdotes and observations make this a welcome return for the man whose sardonic view of police work was the bridge between "Dragnet" and "Hill Street Blues." When a report comes in that Darth Vader is exposing himself to tourists in front of the Chinese Theater, these cops' only reaction is "Which Darth Vader?"

Roman Collars and Irish Pols

Andrew Greeley's latest, *The Senator and the Priest* (Forge, \$24.99), is studded with the usual Greeleyisms -- Irish-Catholic childhoods in Chicago, the philosophical tussle between liberal and traditional Catholics, the corrupting influence of power -- but his plot is a catechism of cliché's.

Sen. Tommy Moran is a sort of Irish-American Paul Wellstone, busy fighting for the little guy in the cesspool of the Capitol. His older brother and nemesis, Father Tony, is a conservative political force of his own in Chicago and a fierce critic of Tommy's politics. And then there's Tommy's feisty, gorgeous lawyer wife, Mary Margaret O'Malley, whose Hibernian charms are the root of the brothers' conflict. According to Tommy, Marymarg is a champion cuddler when she's not arguing cases before the Supreme Court. Hillary Clinton's brains and Maureen O'Hara's curves? No wonder she takes Washington by storm, along with her husband.

A former stay-at-home dad who forswears attack ads, Tommy is a ludicrously written paragon, albeit a handsome one; after a near-fatal attempt on her husband's life, Marymarg assures him, "The trouble with you, Tommy Moran, is that you always look great even when you're feeling awful." Even Greeley fans are likely to have bailed out long before he wraps it up with a few dashed-off chapters (presented as television transcripts) and Marymarg has concluded, "I won't, however, forget our romp of love. Together we'd beaten the bad guys Happy days were indeed here again."

The Grim Avenger

Henry Chang's debut, *Chinatown Beat* (Soho, \$22), introduces Detective Jack Yu, a seasoned veteran of the NYPD who's now back working the streets of Chinatown, where he grew up. The deeply cynical Yu is tracking a Chinese-American child rapist whose turf is the tenements and the projects. His search in the Chinatown underworld leads him to some dangerous characters, including a boyhood friend now on the wrong side of the law and the powerful Uncle Four, leader of the deadly Hip Ching tong.

Haunted by the ghost of his disapproving father, unsupported by his department, Yu is a grim avenger. The action is set in 1994, when East Side gentrification was still embryonic and Yu's New York seemed in its death throes: "Old neighborhoods that had survived the World Wars and Depression years . . . could not survive crack and heroin." All the expected locales are here -- gambling and dance halls, brothels, secret societies -- but the author, who grew up in Chinatown, keeps things fresh by inserting Chinese phrases and explicating cultural folkways on nearly every page. Chang drops a few stitches as his story knits together, but this is a nasty, terse slice of noir, and Yu is a fellow whose adventures should be worth following.

Ring-a-Ding Dead

Now here's an idea: a mystery series set in the boomtown days of Vegas. Veteran writer Robert J. Randisi inaugurates his new Rat Pack series with *Everybody Kills Somebody Sometime* (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), a rat-a-tat whodunit whose microscopic chapters hark back to drugstore pulp fiction.

It's 1960. Frank, Dino, Sammy, Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford are playing the Sands by night and shooting "Ocean's 11" by day. But gentle Dean Martin has been receiving ominous notes, and pit boss Eddie Gianelli is asked by his boss to do a favor for "the boys" and make the problem disappear. Pretty soon Eddie's been beat up, there's a dead showgirl in a swimming pool, and the pit boss has given up chasing cardsharps in favor of chasing hoods.

Randisi conjures up a sharkskin-suited man's world, awash in booze, broads and brio; Angie Dickinson and Judith Campbell Exner show up briefly, but only as arm candy for the boys. Realism isn't *Somebody's* strong suit, but it's a quick romp, a tissue-thin mystery with a flashy fa?ade. ?

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