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Crime Spree

Murder's not picky about where it takes place: the new Ireland, LA's TV studios and deep in Central Park.

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Priest By *Ken Bruen* *St. Martin's Minotaur*. 290 pp. \$23.95

Even those of us who earn our keep by prowling the mean streets of mystery fiction occasionally miss a body -- a body of work, that is, by an extraordinary crime writer. A few weeks ago, I stumbled upon Ken Bruen's *Priest* and felt as slack-jawed as Watson, as dim as Colin Dexter's Sgt. Lewis, in short, as lame-brained as all the notoriously dense second bananas in detective fiction. Why hadn't I spotted this guy before? How did I miss the all-points bulletin that obviously had alerted other critics to his novels, which have earned him a slew of accolades, including the Shamus and Macavity and near-misses for the Edgar and the Anthony? And, most important, how fast can I get my hands on the other Jack Taylor mysteries in Bruen's moody Irish series?

Bruen exploits the dark potential of the mystery form to its fullest, using his tale to pose disturbing existential questions only to come up with answers as hollow as Hammett's *Maltese Falcon*. *Priest* opens in a loony bin (Bruen's politically incorrect term, not mine) in Galway, Ireland, where his freelance detective, Jack Taylor, has been rotting away. Five months earlier, Jack was babysitting a toddler with Down syndrome -- the beloved daughter of close friends -- when he cracked open a second-story window and turned his back on the child for a fatal minute. Ever since, Taylor tells us, he's been "dead but for the formalities." A chance remark by a black fellow patient of the same asylum reawakens Taylor to painful self-awareness as well as to the new look of the Irish population in this "Celtic Tiger" boom era. (A black fellow patient? In Galway?) Taylor shrugs out of his straitjacket just in time to catch a case involving a local priest whose severed head was found on the floor of his confessional.

If a bottle of Bushmills could talk, it would sound like Jack Taylor. Startling yet smoky, Taylor's voice keeps a reader thirsting for more (although Taylor himself is shakily on the wagon). Even more than the plot itself, Taylor's smart social commentary and who-do-you-think-you-are sass give this mystery its power. Here's a typically rousing monologue on the Irish habit of answering a question with a question:

"We may have got rich, but we never got impulsive. Questions are always suspect. The years of British rule, the years of *yes*, questions usually posed by a soldier with a weapon in your face, led to a certain wariness. . . . When I see a map of the island and they're promoting the country, like, say, for the tourist trade, they'll have a giant leprechaun or a harp, slap bang in the middle. I feel they should get honest and put a big question mark, let the folk know what they're letting themselves in for."

What Taylor lets himself in for when he signs on to solve the case of the headless priest is an

investigation into priestly sexual abuse. As in all great detective tales, however, the consequences of this specific crime ripple outward; in this case, they threaten to pull the newly sane detective under again. Both Taylor and the fiend exposed by his inquiry are child destroyers of one sort or another. Whether Taylor, whose sin was unintentional, receives the absolution he hungers for remains to be seen.

-- **Maureen Corrigan, book critic for NPR's "Fresh Air"**

THE ALIBI MAN *By Tami Hoag Bantam. 351 pp. \$26*

Amateur sleuths have advantages over their professional counterparts. They're not bound by police laws, P.I. codes or the regulations that hamstring conventional detectives. Their day jobs and their connections to the victims can add nuance and shading to workaday procedurals. Former cop Elena Estes, last seen in Tami Hoag's *Dark Horse*, has reverted to her amateur status in *The Alibi Man*, working out the physical and psychological damage of her failed police career by serving as a horse trainer for Florida's idle rich. When the body of a beautiful Russian immigrant who works with her in the stable is found in a swamp, Estes's personal investigation leads her to the Russian Mafia and a group of privileged Palm Beach playboys called "The Alibi Club," men who seem to have one another's back no matter what transgressions they're suspected of committing.

Hoag began her career as a romance novelist, and *The Alibi Man* has more than the average mystery's share of amour, beginning with Estes's sometime boyfriend, Det. James Landry, and ramping up when the dashing Spanish polo star Juan Barbaro (yes, really) enters the picture. Estes herself is a nicely complex, sometimes unsympathetic narrator with a seamy family history, which makes it frustrating when Hoag switches points of view and goes from first-person to omniscient narrator; Elena's own observations are far more interesting than the police-procedural chapters. The plot itself is as slick as a John Grisham movie treatment, but Estes is a capable docent on Hoag's tour of ritzy Palm Beach, as the author explores the gulf between the area's gazillionaires and the polyglot world of maids, stablehands, valets and bartenders who keep la vita so very dolce for the horsy set.

-- **Kevin Allman, who frequently reviews mysteries and thrillers**

Daddy's Girl *By Lisa Scottoline HarperCollins. 336 pp. \$25.95*

One would have to have been in suspended animation for the past 20 years or so not to have heard of Lisa Scottoline and her spritzy assortment of gal detectives who uphold truth, justice and the funny feminist way. Indeed, when Christopher Hitchens published his now notorious essay in the January issue of *Vanity Fair* on the killjoy topic of why women aren't funny, my first thought was: "Hasn't he read Lisa Scottoline?"

Clearly not. Hitchens, as well as anyone else who needs a good laugh, should scuttle over to the nearest bookstore and pick up a copy of Scottoline's latest, *Daddy's Girl*. In the opening scene, Natalie "Nat" Greco, a fledgling law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stands before her tiny history of justice class and, as usual, feels "like an A cup in a double-D bra." Nat is taking a pedagogical nose dive: As she gamely lectures about "The Merchant of Venice," her students hide behind their laptops, where she suspects they're answering e-mail and cruising the Internet. "As much as she loved teaching,

she was beginning to think she wasn't very good at it. Could she really suck at her passion? Women's magazines never admitted this as a possibility."

Readers who aren't chortling by now should toss this review and e-mail Hitchens a letter of support; all others -- including educators who've lived through such ego-shredding moments -- will enjoy *Daddy's Girl*. Nat's determination to prove herself as a teacher -- and as an adult in the eyes of her overprotective Italian family -- prompts her to accept a lecturing gig at a prison outside Philadelphia. As luck would have it, some vicious cons attempt a jailbreak that day. In the chaos that ensues, Nat gives emergency first aid to a dying guard and is charged with bearing his cryptic last words to his widow: "It's . . . under the floor." Shades of Nancy, Bess and George! Except that this buried treasure has nothing to do with stolen jewels or historic documents.

The larger issues under scrutiny here have to do with the mysteries of sexual attraction and self-definition. As a bonus, the identity of the ultimate villain will bring a smile of vengeance to the lips of any female teacher who's ever felt herself ill-served by the gender bias of student evaluations.

-- **Maureen Corrigan**

THE TRIGGER EPISODE *By Tom Straw Carroll & Graf. 352 pp. \$25.95*

Bonnie Quinn is the star of "Thanks For Sharing," a long-running single-mom sitcom that's as popular with the masses as Quinn is despised in Hollywood. But on the eve of the show's 100th episode -- the "trigger" number that will send it into eternal syndication and make everyone involved very, very rich -- there's panic at the studio: The mighty Quinn has disappeared.

That's the setting for *The Trigger Episode*, the debut of writer Tom Straw and his hero, Hardwick, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist now working as a bottom-feeder paparazzo. Straw himself is a TV veteran who was executive producer and head writer of the sitcom "Grace Under Fire" (its mercurial star, Brett Butler, bears some relation to the fictional Bonnie Quinn, though Quinn also seems Frankensteined together with pieces of Cybill Shepherd and Roseanne Barr), and his insights into the business of television ring real, from the hurry-up-and-wait minutiae of daily shooting to the various ego brawls and set-tos on the set.

Unfortunately, Straw's insight into the TV industry doesn't carry through to his plot. Hardwick tracks down the runaway sitcom queen by divining that a painting of a constellation on Quinn's dressing room wall might somehow be a map (a helpful astronomer friend triangulates its position, leading Hardwick to her hideout). His former paramour, a national TV journalist, shows up at the studio's behest to interview Quinn at the height of her drug-fueled insanity, a scenario about as likely as a producer allowing Diane Sawyer and a camera crew near Britney Spears in the middle of a head-shaving. Worst of all, Straw's sitcom-writing background shows through in some of the characters, such as Hardwick's tenant Amanda St. Hillaire, a relentlessly spunky screen queen of Hollywood's golden age who uses an antique sword to defend her house against invaders and is prone to cutesyisms like "Jane Austen kicks booty."

-- **Kevin Allman**

Cover-Up By Michele Martinez Morrow. 344 pp. \$23.95

Michele Martinez's suspense novels can't boast much in the way of depth or lyric sensibility or humor, but if you're in the mood for tales about psycho killers loose in New York, they fill the bill. Like her previous *The Finishing School*, which took place in a posh Manhattan girls' academy, Martinez's newest thriller, *Cover-Up*, opens with a death scene that adroitly mingles gore and glitz. The corpse of television reporter/scandal monger Suzanne Shepard is found one evening, deep in the woods of Central Park. An unpleasant word that rhymes with "witch" has been carved onto the reporter's body. Enter Martinez's sexy single-mom avenger, federal prosecutor Melanie Vargas. Vargas works her way through a veritable Rockettes chorus line of the usual suspects: the oily Upper East Side plastic surgeon, the sleazy personal trainer, the city councilman with an eye for skirt. With time out for child care and a steamy sex romp with her FBI agent boyfriend -- in her office, no less -- Vargas homes in on the creep responsible for Shepard's murder. *Cover-Up* is ephemeral entertainment that's just right for the beach or bathtub.

-- **Maureen Corrigan**

HOT ROCKS By Lev Raphael Perseverance. 211 pp. Paperback, \$14.95

A college English department, with its outsized egos and Borgia-quality tenure wars -- short of Washington or the Vatican, could there be a better location for intrigue and infighting? Not for Nick Hoffman, an English professor at the State University of Michigan at Michiganopolis (read: Michigan State University in East Lansing), who is back in Lev Raphael's *Hot Rocks*, on the trail of whoever murdered personal trainer Vlado Zamaria in the sauna of his health club.

Some of Hoffman's previous adventures concentrated on collegiate infighting at the expense of the mystery, but here Raphael downplays the academic bickering and keeps things moving at a clip, enlivening a witty plot with high- and low-cultural references. He cheerfully name-checks William Butler Yeats and Nine Inch Nails alike, and your taste for *Hot Rocks* will depend largely on how much you enjoy such name-dropping and relentless cleverness.

"Michiganopolis" remains an unnecessary distraction; Raphael can't carry off the conceit of a fictional city the way Sue Grafton does, with "Santa Teresa" standing in for the real Santa Barbara. But once again along for the ride are Hoffman's reluctant partner, Stefan, and his colleague Juno Dromgoole, a buxotic, bawdy campus Valkyrie who leavens *Hot Rocks* with a great deal of humor and a dash of sexual confusion for the mild-mannered gay prof in a soufflé-light mystery with some surprisingly complex plotting.

-- **Kevin Allman**

Death Comes for the Fat Man By Reginald Hill HarperCollins. 404 pp. \$24.95

Reginald Hill's novels deserve to be read in fine surroundings -- perhaps in a leather chair by a crackling fire with a good sherry in your hand and a loyal hound at your feet. Or if that Agatha Christie stage set isn't available, at least read Hill's mysteries in a quiet place where you can savor his acrobatic prose, his

sour lemon wit, his intricate puzzle plots.

Death Comes for the Fat Man is the kazillionth in Hill's police procedural series featuring rotund Yorkshire super-sleuth Detective Superintendent Andy Dalziel and his agile second-in-command, Peter Pascoe. As the title indicates, this outing may well be Dalziel's last. He and Pascoe are summoned to deal with a siege at a local video store (a suspected rendezvous spot for Islamic fundamentalist terrorists) when a bomb explodes. The critically wounded Dalziel lies in a coma for most of this novel, although he occasionally drifts into the narrative during brief out-of-body levitations from his hospital bed. Superstitiously believing that he might save Dalziel if he figures out who was responsible for the explosion, Pascoe channels Dalziel's bluster as he investigates both the terrorist network and its vigilante nemesis -- a homegrown bunch of nativist loonies who call themselves the Templars. Further complicating Pascoe's mission is his realization that a mole buried deep within the British intelligence services must be feeding the Templars inside information.

It's proof of Hill's skill as a writer that the reader believes not only that Dalziel's life genuinely hangs in the balance, but also that Hill is not manipulating our readerly anxieties merely to ratchet up the suspense. As Dalziel lingers in limbo, he meditates -- raucously and profanely -- on mortality and the meaning of it all. His ruminations lend depth to this already smart and immensely enjoyable novel.

-- **Maureen Corrigan**

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