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In a batch of first novels, practitioners in other fields focus on criminal conduct.

By Reviewed by Kevin Allman
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Two poets, a lawyer and a newspaper columnist are among those trying their hands at detective fiction this fall, and their sleuths range from a 19th-century English gentleman to a 21st-century Jersey mook, from a [Baltimore](#) homicide investigator to a (quite literally) tortured [Portland](#) cop.

HIGH SEASON By *Jon Loomis* *St. Martin's Minotaur*. 286 pp. \$23.95

In Jon Loomis's fiction debut, it's *High Season* on [Cape Cod](#), and in freaky-deaky Provincetown, things are even freaky-deakier than usual. The corpse of homophobic evangelist Ron Merkin (think real-life anti-gay minister Fred Phelps) is found on a beach, dressed in drag. Laconic sheriff Frank Coffin is faced with a media storm when a few other bodies crop up, possibly threatening the tourist trade. Then there's Coffin's louche uncle, who reappears in the resort town after a mysterious absence of many years. Is he connected to the murders, or is he there to help?

Coffin is an enormously appealing invention, a traumatized former homicide detective in Baltimore now working the (normally) quieter streets where he grew up. P-town proves a plum setting for lighthearted crime, with its frenzied real-estate wars, its 24-karat oddballs and its inexhaustible supply of "tall ships," the heterosexual transvestites who vacation there with their stoic wives. (The Rev. Merkin himself feels shoehorned into the mystery, but his flamboyant demise in a dress catapults the story into action from page one.) Along the way, [Loomis](#), a prize-winning poet in his other literary life, tosses off some wonderful descriptions (sunflowers like "bright prehistoric showerheads," laughter hanging in the air "like a small but lethal cloud of poison gas"), yet none of his wordsmithery gets showy or interferes with this debonair, dry little mystery. With his honed sense of humor and keen *mise en scene*, Loomis is a keeper, and so is Coffin. Puckish Provincetown innkeepers would do well to tuck this one away in the guest room drawers next to the Gideon.

HEARTSICK By *Chelsea Cain* *St. Martin's Minotaur*. 326 pp. \$23.95

You can picture the deal memo that sealed the sale of newspaper columnist Chelsea Cain's first thriller: "Silence of the Lambs. Gender switch." Cain's Hannibal Lector-with-cleavage is Gretchen Lowell, a Northwest nurse who claims 200 victims, and her haunted hunter is pill-popping cop Archie Sheridan, who was tortured by Lowell before she released him and surrendered. Gretchen's trademark? Carving hearts on her captives' chests . . . though she's also a whiz when it comes to extracting intestines with a crochet hook. Now there's a new serial killer stalking Portland schoolgirls, and the investigator is forced to rely on the sociopath's expertise to solve the new case. The setup may be familiar, but Cain's greatest accomplishment is creating a hybrid -- marrying the explicit content of splatter cinema to the conventions of an airport novel.

Three things distinguish *Heartsick*: some sharp writing, a great locale (drizzly Portland is a sullen, noirish, minor-key backdrop), and the third main character, young reporter Susan Ward. In one of the book's first big improbabilities, pink-haired, insecure, smart-mouthed Susan has been assigned to shadow Sheridan and, of course, ends up ensnared in Gretchen's psycho-web as well. After the requisite quirks are enumerated, Cain makes Susan fresh and real (and occasionally really annoying) even as the pas de deux between Archie and his nemesis gets both derivative and explicit, cat-and-mouse gone S&M.

Gretchen also owes a little (okay, a lot) to Catherine Tramell, the ice pick-wielding ice queen played by [Sharon Stone](#) in "Basic Instinct," and the graphic, sexually charged flashbacks in which Gretchen pours drain cleaner down Sheridan's throat aren't going to be everyone's cup of chai. Nor is the book's denouement, which is undeniably movie-ready but relies far too much on a coincidence in Susan's past. *Heartsick* is the first in three planned novels featuring this particular triad, and if Cain is taking requests: more Susan, less Gretchen, please. And hold the drain cleaner.

A BEAUTIFUL BLUE DEATH *By Charles Finch St. Martin's Minotaur. 309 pp. \$24.95*

Charles Finch's first novel breaks no ground in the venerable Victorian mystery tradition, but it's a fine specimen of the genre, due mostly to Finch's detective, the affable Charles Lenox. Lenox's days are spent visiting his brother at Parliament, having dinner at one of his many gentlemen's clubs and reading atlases over a good pipe in his private library. But Lenox loves a mystery, and his neighbor and childhood friend Lady Jane Grey has a corker for him: Prudence, her former maid, now in the employ of a man as wealthy as Lenox but considerably less refined, has swallowed poison and left a cryptic note.

Lenox discovers two odd things: Prudence was illiterate, so who wrote the note? And the bottle of arsenic in her room doesn't match the specific poison in her corpse, bella indigo, a rare and expensive concoction fatal to humans but sometimes used as a pricey [Miracle-Gro](#) for exotic plants. Is it a coincidence that Prudence's new employer is an orchid enthusiast? Soon there's another death at the season's most glittering ball, and Lenox's sleuthing takes him from [London](#)'s highest society to its slummiest slums.

Finch hews to all the conventions of the traditional Victorian, including craftsmanlike plotting and an excellent foil, the bumbling, blustering Inspector Exeter of [Scotland Yard](#). Particularly good is his delineation of Lenox's cozy-but-proper relationship with Lady Jane, and a scene in a coffeehouse filled with dissolute young artists manqué's, a sooty little 19th-century [Starbucks](#). The details have changed in 170 years, but the reasons for murder are the same.

SAMEDI THE DEAFNESS *By Jesse Ball Vintage. 289 pp. Paperback, \$12.95*

The title isn't the only odd thing about poet Jesse Ball's ultra-atmospheric first novel, which seems destined to confound some and mesmerize others. No reader could be more confused than the protagonist, James Sim. He comes across a dying man outside the [White House](#) who claims he's been fatally wounded by a man named Samedi. But when the story makes the papers, it's described as a suicide. Even more curious, a suicide follows every day thereafter, each with a mysterious note from

Samedi attached. Who, or what, is Samedi?

Sim doesn't have time to wonder before he's kidnapped and installed in a "verisylum," a sanitorium for chronic liars. Suspended somewhere between captive and willing guest, he stays on, unsure why he's there, unsure why he doesn't just leave. Much of it has to do with a young woman named Grieve, an asylum resident and co-conspirator; as [David Lynch](#) would put it, she's full of secrets. So is Sim -- he's a man with a photographic memory.

Ball has an original voice; much of the novel is delivered in spare, mannered paragraphs. It owes a bit to nouveau roman, the French literary movement, and even more to expressionism -- in the verisylum, all the maids are named Grieve as well, and the house cat changes names depending on its behavior. Conventional mystery fans may find the fugue-world of *Samedi the Deafness* more admirable than enjoyable, but Ball has hidden a real story in his house of mirrors for those with the patience to explore it.

DEATH BY RODRIGO By *Ron Liebman* Simon & Schuster. 280 pp. \$24

In *Death By Rodrigo*, Mickie Mezzonatti and Sal "Junne" Salerno are a pair of seedy Z-list New Jersey lawyers who make their bones repping street scum: low-level drug dealers, pimps and other [Camden](#) flotsam. But when South American drug lord Rodrigo Gonzales hires them to ensure that he gets sprung from federal prison, it's a case they can't afford to botch . . . not if they want to continue practicing their own brand of greasy law. Even behind bars, Rodrigo has a long reach.

The less-than-eloquent Junne narrates *Rodrigo* in staccato, often discursive sentences, such as "But one thing Reds' girls do not do. Ever. Is mess with him. One did, as Mickie and I heard it." It's an effective, if occasionally tiresome, technique, but it doesn't help a story that too often drags. Liebman, a former prosecutor, exhibits a surer hand with his courtroom scenes than he does with the novel's pacing. His boys have the testosterone-driven dark humor of Joe Wambaugh's cops (or at least a pair of [Tony Soprano](#)'s more bozoish lieutenants), and the colorful characters they bump against are often more fun than the story itself. By far the best scene is a howler in which Junne and Mickie take a couple of prostitutes as their dates to a schmancy legal dinner, a welcome shot of groundling comedy in a debut with more potential than prowess. \hat{A}

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