THE YEAR'S BEST CRIME NOVELS

BY BILL OTT

I f this year's best crime novels tell us anything, it's that mean streets can turn up anywhere—from posh Irish girls' schools to remote Asian islands. There are cop and detective stories here (by John Harvey, Harry Brandt, James Ellroy, and Laura Lippman), but there are also psychological thrillers (Paula Hawkins) and all variety of genre- and subgenre-blenders, from crime meets horror (Lauren Beukes) to crime meets superheroes (Nick Harkaway) to espionage meets noir (Mick Herron) to procedural meets psychological thriller (Tana French). And, of course, this being the best of the year, there's also Louise Penny because, well, she won't be budged from this list.

Let's not forget our best crime novel debuts, the list where the genre's next superheroes go to be born. The range may be even wider here, from a historical cozy starring a British "undercook" (no, not Daisy Mason) to a middle-school teacher in contemporary Japan. So what's the message in all this: excellent crime fiction comes in many forms, across many borders and time periods, and with appeal for many kinds of readers. We don't claim to have represented all of those forms and types of appeal in this list, but we think we've taken a good-sized chunk out of the genre's infinite variety (to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare, a pretty fair crime writer himself).

Broken Monsters. By Lauren Beukes. 2014. Little, Brown/Mulholland, $26 (9780316216821).

We're all about genre-blending this year, so it's no surprise that our leadoff top 10 selection is straddling the worlds of police procedural and horror. Yes, Detroit homicide detective Gabriella Versado is tracking a serial killer, but not just any serial killer: this one likes to fuse the upper halves of his victims' bodies with various animal parts. Think Peter Straub meets Karin Slaughter and Chelsea Cain.

Darkness, Darkness. 2014. By John Harvey. Pegasus, $24.95 (9781605986166).

Thankfully, Harvey decided against his plan to kill off Nottingham copper Charlie Resnick. After an exquisite coda to the series (*Cold in Hand*, 2008), he now delivers a definitively final episode in the story of a detective whose focus is perpetually clouded by his abiding melancholy over the all-too-human lives of the individuals caught in the backlash of crime. So it is again as the now-retired Resnick is asked to help investigate a murder that ties back to one of his first cases. The Resnick novels remain one of the high points in the history of crime fiction.

The Girl on the Train. By Paula Hawkins. 2015. Riverhead, $26.95 (9781594633669).

One of the most talked about crime novels of the year, this one deserves its buzz. Melding the voyeurism of *Rear Window* with the unreliable narration of *Gone Girl*, Hawkins delivers a riveting tale about a woman peering into the lives of her former husband and his new lover. What makes this wicked thriller so compulsively readable is the way the author expertly mines female archetypes.

Hush Hush. By Laura Lippman. 2015. Morrow, $26.95 (9780062083425).

In Lippman's first Tess Monaghan novel since 2011, motherhood plus murder equals one intense and uproarious mystery. Tess, now a sleep-deprived momma, has deeply conflicted feelings about her latest client, a woman who was acquitted by reason of insanity for killing her infant daughter. With an intriguing cast of characters, stinging dialogue, and a superbly suspenseful plot, this is a provocative tale about parents good and evil.

The Long Way Home. By Louise Penny. 2014. Minotaur, $24.99 (9781250022066).

With her beloved series hero, former Montreal Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, now retired, Penny moves from finding reasons to get Gamache back to his beloved village of Three Pines to taking him on a road trip, first to Europe and then to the wilds of Canada's upper St. Lawrence River. As always, Penny dexterously combines suspense with

psychological drama, overlaying the whole with an all-powerful sense of landscape as a conduit to meaning. Another gem from an endlessly inventive writer.

Nobody Walks. By Mick Herron. 2015. Soho, $25.95 (9781616954864).

Herron's remarkable novel has enough suspense, action, and deductive dazzle to keep thriller fans happy, but be warned: these are deep psychological waters. Tom Bettany, a British ex-spy, comes out of retirement when he learns his estranged son has been murdered. But is it all a ploy to get Tom back in the game? When the final revelation comes, it lands like a physical blow. Powerful stuff, written in a clipped style that belies its ability to convey strong emotion.

Perfidia. By James Ellroy. 2014. Knopf, $28.95 (9780307956996).

Cast with many of the characters from Ellroy's legendary L.A. Quartet, this first volume in the Second L.A. Quartet marks both a return to the scene of Ellroy's greatest success and a triumphant return to form. The apparent ritual suicide of a Japanese family on the eve of Pearl Harbor could be murder, but there's panic in the streets, and the tendency is to fit the facts to the crime. Ellroy's wartime L.A. evokes William S. Burroughs at his surreal best, and, yet, the novel is remarkably balanced and well plotted, and the prose veers away from the bombast of Ellroy's past.
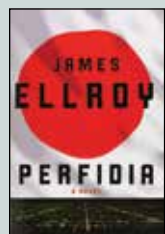
The Secret Place. By Tana French. 2014. Viking, $27.95 (9780670026326).

A year after the murder of a young man on the grounds of posh St. Kilda's School for Girls outside Dublin, one of the female students approaches Detective Stephen Moran with a clue that prompts the investigation to be reopened—and to focus on two rival school cliques. French brilliantly and plausibly channels the rebellion, conformity, inchoate longings, rages, and shared bonds of teen girls in the throes of coming-of-age.

Tigerman. By Nick Harkaway. 2014. Knopf, $26.95 (9780385352413).

Harkaway is at it again, celebrating pop culture, mixing genres like a mad scientist, and producing a book that is both deeply moving and deliriously entertaining. On a tiny Asian island, polluted beyond salvation, a washed-up British bureaucrat reinvents himself as Tigerman to please a comics-loving island boy and sets out to claim revenge for the murder of a cafe owner. Owing as much to Murakami as Stan Lee, this ode to superheroes combines suspense with coming-of-age drama and a noir sensibility.

The Whites. By Harry Brandt. 2015. Holt, $28.95 (9780805093995).

Richard Price returns as Harry Brandt with the story of Billy Graves, an aging NYPD cop who suspects that one of his cronies in the Wild Geese, a legendary anti-crime unit from the nineties, may now be killing the crooks who got away back in the day. With one-of-a-kind characters and settings so real you can smell them, *The Whites* isn't about cops and killers as much as it's about the damage we all carry, the sins we've all committed, and the heartbreaking unlikeliness of forgiveness. An unrelenting, moving story of crime and social justice.
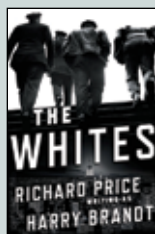
BEST CRIME FICTION DEBUTS

An Appetite for Violets. By Martine Bailey. 2015. St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, $26.95 (9781250056917).

Set in the 1770s, Bailey's debut stars Biddy Leigh, undercook at Mawton Hall in Cheshire, England, who accompanies the master's wife on a trip to Italy, where she falls in love with a chef and is thrown into a murder case. A delectable dish for foodies and the *Downton Abbey* crowd.

The Black Hour. By Lori Rader-Day. 2014. Prometheus/Seventh Street, $15.95 (9781616148850).

A specialist in the sociology of violence, Professor Amelia Emmet, recovering from a gunshot wound, returns to teaching but is plagued by questions about why and by whom she was shot. A darkly witty debut that bears comparison with the work of S. J. Watson and Gillian Flynn.

Confessions. By Kanae Minato. Tr. by Stephen Snyder. 2014. Little, Brown/Mulholland, $15 (9780316200929).

When the body of a young girl turns up in the pool at a Japanese middle school, the victim's mother, a teacher at the school, embarks on an elaborate revenge plot with far-reaching implications. This spellbinding novel offers a fascinating peek into modern Japanese society and would make an excellent pairing with Tana French's *The Secret Place*.

Elizabeth Is Missing. By Emma Healey. 2014. Harper, $25.99 (9780062309662).

An Englishwoman slipping into dementia must turn detective when her best friend disappears. Part mystery, part meditation on memory, part Dickensian revelation of the underside of charity.

The Marauders. By Tom Cooper. 2015. Crown, $25 (9780804140560).

A ragtag collection of fishermen, potheads, and wannabe drug dealers in a Louisiana bayou town wrestle with the likely extinction of their way of life. Recommend to fans of Daniel Woodrell and Willy Vlautin.

Night of the Jaguar. By Joe Gannon. 2014. Minotaur, $25.99 (9781250048028).

Gannon places a classic hard-boiled detective in the middle of 1980s Nicaragua, with its poisonous politics, and tells the story of the times in emotion-drenched, wonderfully lyrical prose.

The Objects of Her Affection. By Sonya Cobb. 2014. Sourcebooks/Landmark, $14.95 (9781402294242).

The wife of a museum curator impulsively tucks a silver mirror into her diaper bag and, just like that, becomes an art thief. A tautly paced psychological thriller.

The Swimmer. By Joakim Zander. Tr. by Elizabeth Clark Wessel. 2015. Harper, $27.99 (9780062337245).

Zander's elegantly written political thriller—a best-seller in Europe—ranges across multiple continents and three decades to tell a compelling tale of lies and betrayal that encompasses the Iraq War.

An Untamed State. By Roxanne Gay. 2014. Black Cat, $16 (9780802122513).

Set in Haiti, this excoriating tale of a Miami lawyer's kidnapping and subsequent torture is ferocious in its depiction of prejudice and desperation.

The Ways of the Dead. By Neely Tucker. 2014. Viking, $27.95 (9780670016587).

Based on a series of real-life murders in Washington, D.C., Tucker's streetwise debut stars a newspaper reporter who doesn't buy the too-easy explanation of ghetto violence. Reminiscent of early George Pelecanos.