

For a follow-up to our Agatha and Anthony Award-winning collections of essays, *100 Favorite Mysteries of the Century* (2000) and *They Died in Vain: Overlooked, Underappreciated and Forgotten Mystery Novels* (2003), we asked 100 mystery writers:

Did a mystery set you on your path to being a writer?

Is there a classic mystery that remains important to you today?

Find their answers in:

MYSTERY MUSES

100 Classics That Inspire Today's Mystery Writers

Coming August 2006 from
The Crum Creek Press!

Turn the page for a preview ...

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Nancy Means Wright on The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins (1868)

I remember it as a full moon, although it might have been a three-quarter. I was at our lake cottage in Vermont, and I'd just put the children to bed. Full of adrenaline from that luminous moon, I was wide awake with nothing to read. But wait — in the old, scarred bookcase, a copy of *The Moonstone*. I curled up with it on the sofa...

An ancient curse, a stained nightgown, Hindus lurking about an English manse, and, on the eve of Rachel Verinder's eighteenth birthday, a gift of the moonstone — a diamond the size of a plover's egg that "shone awfully out of the depths of its own brightness." A diamond that disappears that same night, sending owners, guests, and servants into a paroxysm of suspicion and fear — dashing the hopes of Franklin Blake, whose beloved Rachel has shut her door to him.

I was amazed by this 1868 novel whose Sergeant Cuff of Scotland Yard, our first English detective, uses methods of reconstructing a crime that still resonate in today's crime fiction. Cuff, whose face is "as sharp as a hatchet," his skin "as dry and withered as an autumn leaf." Whose steely eyes, encountering yours, look as if they expect "something more from you than you were aware of yourself."

But Sergeant Cuff relates only a small part of the story. There are multiple first person narrators. My favorite is the house steward, Gabriel Betteredge, a congenial 70ish man who often feels an "attack of detective fever" coming on. Like my own amateur sleuth, Ruth Willmarth, Betteredge is fiercely loyal, hospitable and pragmatic, imbued with the Puritan ethic of work as the salvation of the soul. He observes, he judges, he misjudges; he is often baffled and overwhelmed. And like my Ruth, who holds her own small prejudices and suspicions of strangers, he is often an unreliable narrator.

The narrators, trustworthy or fallible, provide not only

suspense and drama, but humor as well. The evangelist Miss Clack with her ubiquitous tracts reappears in my own books (in part) as Ruth's self-righteous sister-in-law. For it was *The Moonstone* that led me to write in the personas of several characters in each of my books, hoping in this way to create, as Collins does, fully rounded — if flawed — individuals. “Right or wrong,” as he states in his preface, the conduct of these characters “directs the course” of the novel's events.

For it was Collins' intent “to trace the influence of character on circumstance.” It is the characters' quirks and desires, such as the passion of plain, misshapen Rosanna for Franklin, that shape the plot — to my mind, the best, the most organic way to write. Rosanna hides a vital clue down by the Shivering Sands; Rachel saw something traumatic the night of the diamond's disappearance, but will tell no one, not even Franklin, whom she loves. It is this maddening silence that gives the novel its main narrative drive.

There are myriad twists and turns in *The Moonstone*: a suicide, a little horror and violence, a generous helping of romance. The story weaves through the witnesses' spellbinding testimonies to its inevitable ending — which I won't divulge except to say that the lovers reunite, and order is restored. And isn't this why we write? To bring order back into our harried lives?

Yes. To close the book and sigh, the mystery resolved. And if the night is clear, to look out again at the faithful moon, and feel that, for a moment at least, all is right with the world.

Nancy Means Wright (www.nancymeanswright.com) has published eleven books, including five mystery novels with St. Martin's Press featuring earthy, hot-tempered dairy farmer Ruth Willmarth. *Mad Cow Nightmare* (2005) is the latest. A former Bread Loaf scholar and current scholar for Vermont Humanities Council, Nancy lives and writes in Cornwall, Vermont.

**Michael Lister on
The Innocence of Father Brown by G.K. Chesterton
(1911)**

I wanted to write clerical detective mysteries before I knew anything about G.K. Chesterton or Father Brown. So when I happened upon the 1990 Avenel edition of *Father Brown Crime Stories* in a dusty old bookstore in Atlanta the year I graduated from college, it was nothing less than serendipitous. During that momentous year of transition, as I was being born into my adult life, Chesterton in many ways became my literary father and Brown the fictional father to my ecclesiastical sleuth, John Jordan.

It would be four years later, as I was finishing my graduate degree in theology and about to enter into full-time prison chaplaincy, that ex-cop turned prison chaplain, John Jordan, was born. But there's no doubt that the seeds of his birth had been planted in my discovery of Chesterton all those years earlier.

The birth of the clerical detective began late one night when, unable to find a good detective story while staying at the house of a boyhood friend, G.K. Chesterton decided to write his own. Of course, religion and murder go back a lot further than Chesterton's sleepless night — as far back as Cain and Abel in fact.

In *Father Brown*, Chesterton created an interesting and lovable character who has surprising insight into the darker side of humanity, a trait he attributed to hearing their darkest secrets in his confessional: "Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?"

Like the plots of genre masters Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, Chesterton's plots are enormously improbable. They shouldn't, however, be dismissed because of this. As Chesterton himself once wrote, they belong "to the grand and joyful

company of the things called jokes. The story is a fancy; an avowedly fictitious fiction. We may say if we like that it is a very artificial form of art; I should prefer to say that it is professedly a toy, a thing that children ‘pretend’ with.”

The irony of *The Innocence of Father Brown* is that Father Brown is not innocent at all. Or if he is, it is an innocence not of the mind but of the heart. Innocence does not imply ignorance nor does purity require naiveté. Because of his vocation, Father Brown, like all clerical detectives who have followed him, is in a unique position to understand humanity. As Ellis Peters, creator of Brother Cadfael said, the approach of the religious detective “must rest mainly on the observation of character, which is of far more interest than forensic detail.”

There are a number of ways John Jordan differs from Father Brown. Honor my father though I do, like any son I’ve had to find my own way. Besides I’ve had many literary fathers, and part of the fun of working in a genre is to play with and against its conventions. I owe as much to hardboiled writers like Hammett and Chandler as I do Chesterton. I knew from the very beginning that I would introduce a clerical detective into the world of the hardboiled detective novel, and I felt that prison chaplaincy was the place those two disparate worlds collide.

I think part of Father Brown’s and Chaplain Jordan’s appeal is their moral authority, but Brown and Jordan aren’t merely out for justice. They’re also ministers who see a crime scene as an opportunity to help those in need — they are not so much bloodhounds as hounds of heaven.

In just a few years, the ecclesiastical sleuth will celebrate its first century of crime-fighting and soul-saving. Thanks to the foundation Chesterton laid, the subgenre continues to thrive, and it doesn’t take a prophet to foresee that commandments will continue to be broken and clerical cops will continue to patrol the celestial beat.

Michael Lister (www.MichaelLister.com) is the author of the

acclaimed John Jordan mysteries, *Power in the Blood*, *Blood of the Lamb* and *The Body and the Blood*. Before becoming a full-time writer, Michael was the youngest chaplain within the Florida Department of Corrections. His seven years of prison chaplaincy bring authenticity and realism to his mysteries featuring ex-cop turned prison chaplain, John Jordan.

**P.M. Carlson on
The Fear Sign/Sweet Danger by Margery Allingham
(1933)**

Writers don't write alone. As we pull places and characters and events from the murky swirl of our not-yet-thoughts, ghosts hover — wisps of people we've met, stories we've read, situations we want to challenge. When I began writing mysteries, I wanted to show that a woman could care about family and career and still have adventures. A couple of insistent ghosts showed up from Margery Allingham's *The Fear Sign*, one of the earlier Albert Campion mysteries. One was Campion, of course, bright and brave enough to play the role of the very proper Hereditary Paladin of Averno early in *The Fear Sign*, but more often hiding from enemies and even friends behind a clownish facade of pranks and inane speech. In *The Fear Sign* a wealthy villain tried to stop his meddling by hiring him to go abroad. This "personage" explained the detailed preparations, ending:

"Your usual tailor has supplied a complete tropical outfit, which is waiting for you on board the Marquisita."

"Splendid! Now all I've got to think about is a bottle of Mothersill, and a bag of nuts for the natives, I suppose."

"That facetiousness," said the personage. "I've heard about that. I find it very irritating myself."

For me *The Fear Sign* stood out even from other Campion

mysteries because it introduced young Amanda Fitton. She supported her impoverished family by running a mill and by trying to make the threadbare family home into an appealing inn. Only seventeen, Amanda was both scientist and mechanic. She ran a dynamo to recharge people's wireless batteries and restored an ancient automobile to running order. Like a youthful Rosie the Riveter, the capable Amanda showed us that women could run a business or a country (or a war — in later books, the grown-up Amanda designed airplanes). Unlike previous Allingham heroines who were caring and courageous but basically reactive, Amanda made things happen.

She could even deal with Campion. The “personage” quoted above found Campion's foolish prattle irritating. Compare Amanda's reaction as she showed him around her place, commenting:

“Appearances matter an awful lot.”

“Oh, rather,” said Mr. Campion. “I knew a man once who carried it to excess, though. His name was Gosling, you see, so he always dressed in grey and yellow, and occasionally wore a great false beak.... And finally he moved into a wooden house with just slats in front instead of windows, and you opened the front door with a pulley on the roof. It had a natty little letterbox on the front gate with “The Coop” painted on it. Soon after, his wife left him and the Borough Council stepped in. But I see you don't believe me.”

“Oh, but I do,” said Amanda. “I was his wife. Come and see the mill.”

She enjoyed his inanities, but not just as audience — as participant too. It was a tiny moment in the book, but a signal that these two understood each other and could trust each other as teammates when the danger increased.

My mysteries are American, and I don't write about lost earldoms. But I too love science, and family, and theatre, and

the joy of shared adventures. My characters juggle these often competing values as they solve crimes: statistician Maggie Ryan and actor Nick O'Connor build a family, Deputy Sheriff Marty Hopkins struggles to reconcile her role as mother with her role as law enforcement officer, Bridget Mooney is driven by family duty as well as love for the stage. For me, the playful spirits of Albert and Amanda still inspire.

P.M. Carlson taught psychology and statistics at Cornell University before turning to mysteries. Her novels have been nominated for the Edgar, Macavity, and Anthony Awards, and one made the Drod Review's Editors' Choice List. A former President of Sisters in Crime, she lived several years in southern Indiana, the setting of *Deathwind*, a Deputy Sheriff Marty Hopkins novel.

**Elaine Viets on
The Sign of the Twisted Candles by Carolyn Keene
(1933)**

When I was nine, my mother gave me her Nancy Drew mysteries from the 1930s. She thought they were sweet, safe books. I thought they were like handing a bomb to an anarchist. They blew apart my ordinary life in Florissant, Missouri.

Parents never understood that Nancy was subversive. She had everything we wanted: Her cool dad bought her a car. Her mother was delightfully and distantly dead. She never said, "You're not going out in that getup, young lady!" Instead, Nancy had a motherly housekeeper who gave her good meals, good advice and no criticism. Her boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, was there when she wanted him, but never tried to guilt her into giving it up on the family-room couch.

Nancy and her "chums" were exotic. They used words like "quaint" and "ruse." A dinner started with "jellied consomme" and ended with "nut bread, ice cream, chocolate layer cake."

I had no idea what jellied consomme was, but I knew it wasn't served in Florissant. Chums who ate three desserts knew how to live.

While I was in college, Nancy Drew disappeared from my bookshelf. I forgot about the titian-haired sleuth — or thought I did. Years later, after I'd written my ninth mystery, I reread Nancy's ninth mystery, *The Sign of the Twisted Candles*. I realized that Nancy was still with me.

I write chicklit mysteries. That's a marketing label for women's crime fiction. Whatever you call it, Nancy was the forerunner of chicklit. Consider these elements in *Twisted*:

- Shopping. A man may blurt out a clue over a beer, but when a woman tries on a dress, she bares all. Shopping is not frivolous. It's a female bonding ritual. Nancy invites the orphaned Carol into her world with, "Let's go downtown on a shopping spree!"
- Interrogation technique. Nancy does her questioning over tea. This cozy approach seems more sensible than the hardboiled method of beating and bullying.
- Women friends. Nancy goes everywhere with her female friends, Bess and George. They give her a mystery, then become part of the problem. They may lose an inheritance if Nancy continues her investigation. Nancy doesn't abandon her friends in the name of misplaced honor. Chicklit women know men may leave them, but female friendship is forever.
- Cars. Hot cars are a chicklit staple. Nancy drove a roadster first, then later a convertible. Like many chicklit heroines, she has a heavy foot, but she can handle her iron — and change the tires.
- Attitude. Nancy is fearless. She orders around the "suave, sleek" crook Jemitt and attacks his abusive wife "with the speed of a panther." Critics snicker because the police and other important adults listen to Nancy. But it makes

sense. In *Twisted*, Nancy says at least five times, “My father is Carson Drew, the attorney.” That’s code for “We have money and influence.” Chicklet women know their own power.

- Men. Both Nancy’s father and her boyfriend are supportive. Chicklit women wouldn’t have it any other way. After a night with kidnappers and crooks, Ned says, “One thing that makes you so interesting, Nancy, is that I never know when I ask you to go out, what mystery will come our way!”

There’s more — enough to fill a novel, or in my case, nine novels. And it’s not just me. In women’s crime fiction, a sarcastic male always asks the heroine, “Who do you think you are, Nancy Drew?”

The answer is yes.

Elaine Viets writes two series. *Murder Unleashed*, the next book in the best-selling Dead-End Job series, will be out in hardcover in May 2006. *Dying in Style* features Josie Marcus, mystery shopper. Elaine has won the Agatha and Anthony Awards. She lives with her husband, Don Crinklaw, in Fort Lauderdale.

Nancy Pickard on

Double Indemnity by James M. Cain (1944)

At first blush, which is something a hard-boiled writer would never do, James M. Cain does not look like an authorial influence on me. He’s not just hardboiled, he’s one of the fathers of the hardboiled genre, while I am usually placed among the cozies. What in the world could he and I have in common in our writing?

That he is a big influence on me is something I can never deny, even if nobody else ever believes it. Look at the name of

my first mystery heroine: Jenny Cain. What's her dad's name? Jimmy Cain. I didn't even realize I had lifted James M. Cain's name until many books into my Jenny Cain series. That theft was unconscious on my part — honest, officer — but certain other assets of the original Mr. Cain I will happily confess to stealing.

The man loved melodrama. So do I, and when I start to hesitate before committing a fictional act of it, I think: What would James do? I know what the answer is: he'd go for the heat, he'd go over the top, because that's the kind of writer he was, a melodramatic one, thank god. He married hot characters to cold, spare dialogue. It is that strange and wonderful juxtaposition that gives *Double Indemnity*, and his other work, so much of its dramatic tension and irony.

The man loved to play against his readers biases and expectations, and so do I. In *Double Indemnity*, the readers of his day expected a man to be the smart and canny one, the player. Cain obviously knew that, and so he lured readers down the path of their own sexism, and then he pulled the rug out from under them at the same time that he pulled it out from under his male character.

He loved to surprise readers and his characters in as many other ways as possible, too. I happen to think that the best mystery and suspense writers are those who understand how very much readers adore surprises. Surprise me, we are begging every book we pick up, even when we pick up a book in a mystery series that we think we're reading only for the comfort of its familiarity. Somehow, somewhere in this book, surprise me. If the author doesn't — and most don't — we are disappointed, even in our favorites. For first-time readers of *Double Indemnity*, reading it sometime in the first twenty or so years of its existence, there was one delicious surprise after another.

This will probably sound like heresy to his fans, but the writer I privately align him with is none other than Agatha Christie. Partly, it's that they were, in their individual corners

of the mystery world, masters of limning characters with quick strokes. Nobody did that better in their time than the two of them. But I also see in both of them that love of melodrama (consider Christie's final scenes in which *All Is Revealed*), that love of playing against their reader's prejudices, and their love of surprise.

Double Indemnity is a little masterpiece of getting a story told quickly and urgently and making you blink, if not gasp, with surprise. It is hot and cold, sentimental and cynical. My breath comes more quickly whenever I think of it, even now, all these years and novels later.

The ability to leave readers breathless is a fine quality in a writer, and nobody ever did it any better than James M. Cain in *Double Indemnity*.

Nancy Pickard has written 16 mystery novels and dozens of short stories. She has won three Agatha Awards, two Macavity Awards, two Anthony Awards, and a Shamus Award. She is a three-time Edgar Award nominee. Her latest book, co-written with Lynn Lott, is *Seven Steps on the Writer's Path*.

Sandra Balzo on Ammie, Come Home by Barbara Michaels (1968)

When I was asked the question, I didn't hesitate:

Ammie, Come Home by Barbara Michaels is the book that inspired me to become a writer.

What I didn't know, as I sat down to write this, was....why.

Ammie, Come Home is one of 29 novels written under the pseudonym "Barbara Michaels," by Mystery Writers of America Grandmaster Barbara Mertz. Mertz may be better known for her New York Times Bestsellers penned as "Elizabeth Peters," but it's the Michaels books I treasure.

Ammie, Come Home is what we mystery buffs call a "woo-woo." Woo-woo...like ghost — get it? I got it, and I loved it. So

did a lot of other people. In fact, the book has been called the best American supernatural mystery of the twentieth century.

The story involves Ruth Bennett, owner of an elegant Georgetown home, and her niece Sara, who is staying with Ruth while attending college. One night Sara starts exhibiting behavior that can be explained as either possession or, well...insanity. The book, as reviewers have said, is “dripping with atmosphere,” and downright “chilling.” But under the chills and the atmosphere, *Ammie* is a story of the unlikely alliance — Ruth, Sara’s scruffy boyfriend Bruce, and college professor Pat MacDougal — that tries to save the girl.

I vividly remember reading it the very first time. I had checked the book out of the library and I devoured it the moment I got home. I can still hear the crackle of the plastic-covered book jacket as I opened it, feel the weight of the thick paper as I turned the pages, and suck in that lovely, musty “library book” smell as I read.

Since then, *Ammie, Come Home* has become comfort food to me. I return to it when I need to, just as I might to Campbell’s Tomato Soup, or a McDonald’s cheeseburger and orange drink, or — more likely these days — a nice cabernet sauvignon.

Like a glass of good red wine, *Ammie, Come Home* is comforting, but also complex. The art, the language: “...the terror began. It came slowly and slyly, like a trickle of dirty water through a crack.” Or, in describing Sara, simply “the familiar, unrecognizable face.”

I’m more aware of the nuances now; but, when I first read *Ammie*, all I knew was that it took me to a place where good was rewarded and evil was punished — even after death. And despite the fact that most of the characters in the book weren’t related to each other, and I was kin to none, I felt bereft when I closed the book. Like I’d lost a family.

I could regain that family, though, by simply opening the book again.

That was important to me.

You see, *Ammie, Come Home* came out in 1968. My father was dying of lung cancer. I was fourteen.

I was angry, because life seemed so unfair.

I was scared, because I knew my dad would die, as he did that December.

And I was ashamed, because my awful, secret fear was that my mother would die, too, and leave me alone.

In short, I was ripe for a fictional world to disappear into and, particularly, for a book like *Ammie, Come Home*. I needed to believe there was life after death. That family could form where there was none. And, most of all, I needed to believe that there was justice. Somewhere. Somehow.

And isn't that why we read — and write — mysteries after all?

To face our demons and triumph? To live our worst nightmares and still wake up in the morning?

Barbara Michaels helped me do that. Bless her for that.

Oh, and bless my mother, too. She's turning ninety this year.

Sandra Balzo's debut book, *Uncommon Grounds*, “puts a twenty-first century spin on the traditional cozy, replacing tea with coffee as the comfort beverage of choice,” says Publishers Weekly. Balzo's first short story “The Grass is Always Greener” (EQMM) was nominated for an Anthony Award and won both the Robert L. Fish and Macavity Awards. Her second story, “Viscery” (EQMM) won the Derringer Award and was nominated for a Macavity.

Michael Lewin on

The Goodbye Look by Ross Macdonald (1969)

I was already a married person when I began to read detective fiction. My then-wife introduced me to Raymond Chandler. She'd found him when a high school English teacher told her, “If you must read junk, then at least read good junk.”

After I finished Chandler's novels, I discovered Ross Macdonald. By that time — the mid-'60s — Macdonald was being acclaimed as Chandler's rightful heir. Sententious literary critics even allowed as how he might just possibly be a serious writer despite his writing in a genre. While I admire a lot about Chandler, it took Macdonald's books — which made the family a legitimate central axis for mysteries — to make me want to try writing mysteries myself.

But although Macdonald's oeuvre prepared the ground, it was *The Goodbye Look* that actually got me going.

The Goodbye Look came out in 1969 and because I had a job and had just sold my first book — a non-fiction classic called *How to Beat College Tests* — I bought the new Macdonald in hardback. I read it quickly — slurping up some of the language delights along the way: "Pacific Street rose like a slope in purgatory from the poor lower town to a hilltop section of fine old homes." "The girl was wan with jealousy." "His eyes were black and glistening like asphalt squeezed from a crevice."

Chandler disliked Macdonald's early "pretentiousness in the phrasing and choice of words." Chandler suspected they were "compensation for a lack of some kind of natural animal emotion." But I always enjoyed the language in Macdonald and if sometimes it's a bit much I'll tolerate the excesses to get the goodies. We mustn't take ourselves too seriously, eh?

The Goodbye Look has a typically complicated story, along with Archer getting a bit of nookie and the kind of little plot touch I've always liked — characters who break into a house in order to put money into a safe. A good read.

But *The Goodbye Look* served another function for me. Like so many books of the genre, its plot was far too complicated for my poor brain to keep track of. So I got the idea to go through the book again and make a chart of the story to see if it really did hold together and follow its own logic. So I went back, chapter by chapter, fact by fact, and tracked Macdonald's story.

I found no errors of fact or logic. That would not surprise me

now, knowing as I do more mystery books and many more writers. But back then — summer of '69, when the Mets were still in last place — analyzing this Ross Macdonald classic was a task that fascinated me.

And one that stayed with me, even during the following months when the Mets won the Series, my first child was born and we drove across the country to LA to show off little Liz to her grandmother.

It was in LA, in December, that I passed a little spare time by beginning to write a story with a private detective in it. The story was about a teenager who was trying to find her biological father and although Albert Samson was no Lew Archer, the story, which later became *Ask the Right Question*, certainly owed its existence to *The Goodbye Look*. But, where to set it...? I know. How about... Indianapolis...?

Most of **Michael Z. Lewin's** (www.MichaelZLewin.com) mystery novels are set in Indianapolis, where he grew up. The latest is *Eye Opener* (Five Star, 2004) which revisits his Indy private eye, Albert Samson after many years. For more information about Mike's books, stories, plays and other interests try his web site.

M.J. Rose on A Judgment in Stone by Ruth Rendell (1977)

“I would think that the old-fashioned detective story which is so much a matter of clues and puzzles, is certainly on the way out, if not already gone. Crime novels now are much more novels of character, and novels which look at the world we live in.” (Interview in *The Irish Times*)

In 1980's, when I was the creative director of a mid-sized NYC advertising agency, my childhood dream of being a novelist went from a burning desire to a barely flickering flame. I'd always wanted to be a writer, but I was no longer sure I

wanted to write. Everything I was reading about plot, about language, about narration, about voice, left out what fascinated me most: the psychology of the characters.

The more books I read, and the more writers I met, the more I became convinced that if I wanted to pursue an alternative career, it shouldn't be that of a author, but rather a psychologist.

And then, in 1988, on a flight to LA to shoot a commercial, I started reading *A Judgement in Stone* by Ruth Rendell.

“Eunice Parchman Killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write.”

Rendell had me with the first line and hasn't let me go for the last twenty years. But it's not the quality of that initial book that impacted me — I'd been reading great and good and bad books for years.

Like a first kiss, *Judgement in Stone* opened my eyes to what was possible. It was the first true novel of psychological suspense I'd read by a contemporary writer (even if it wasn't yet categorized as such) and it rekindled my dream.

Yes, in *Judgment in Stone*, Rendell writes stunning descriptions and brilliant dialog, creates a complex plot and pays immaculate attention to detail. But it's her ability to take reader deeper and deeper into her character's psyche that makes her the master she is and makes *Judgment in Stone* such an seminal book both in her oeuvre and for me.

Today it's hard to realize that in the '70s, when Rendell wrote this book, it was controversial that on the first page not only the murder but the murderer's identity is given away.

This was no ordinary whodunit — it was a whydunit. The mystery is not who committed this crime but rather — why was this crime committed?

And that was a radical departure.

No less stunning was how Rendell created a page-turner and yet at the same time wrote a book that indicted society for turning a blind eye to the problems of illiteracy in England.

It's a novel of depth, of psychology, of sociology, of ideas.

“I’m more interested in the motivation than the crime itself,” Rendell said in a 2002 interview in *The Age*. “I am fascinated by what makes people do dreadful things, not by how they do them.”

And for this reader and writer, that fascination opened up a world of possibility.

Judgement in Stone became my talisman, reminding me that labels and genre descriptions only exist to be stretched and twisted and turned inside out until you find your own balance of hide and seek, internal and external, and dark and light.

M.J. Rose (www.mjrose.com) is the author of several novels of psychological suspense including the international bestseller, *The Halo Effect* which was a nominee for an Anthony Award. Her most recent novel is *The Venus Fix* (2006). Her work has also appeared in *Oprah Magazine*, *Poets & Writers* and several anthologies. Rose is on the board of International Thriller Writers Inc. and runs two popular blogs, *Backstory* and *Buzz, Balls & Hype*.

Pari Noskin Taichert on

What’s the Worst That Could Happen by Donald E. Westlake (1996)

The way I remember it, the sky was as dark as my mood. Another rejection letter sat on my desk, crumpled and crippling. My computer hummed, but the noise droned without distinction. Inspiration flowed through someone else’s fingertips.

In desperation, I went to the library and wandered amid the bookcases feeling sorry for myself. Mumbling, I composed never-to-be-sent responses to agents and editors who scorned the brilliance of my manuscripts. Surrounded by books, I pouted. Why did other people get published, anyway?

After awhile, I arrived at the *Ws* in the fiction section — and saw it. There, at eye level, sat a novel taunting and tempting

with its innocent title, *What's the Worst that Could Happen?*

Donald Westlake's use of six common words to hint at grand misadventure brought laughter and despair like one-two punches to my literary ego and compositional laziness. He lured me in before I had even opened his book. Though the intentionality of the title impressed me, I was in no mood to be won over.

Unconvinced, I picked up the book between two fingers — as if it might burn — and skimmed. A quick paragraph about gaudy boutiques with shiny thises and thats and then this line, “It was like being in a duty-free shop for magpies.”

How could I not fall in love with Westlake's voice then and there? His ability to capture moments, and translate them into something fresh on the page with single lines, unleashed a seminal realization. Even the most ordinary plot can sparkle anew when an author takes the time to craft what I now call “zingers.” These deceptively brief observations or lines of dialog are the stuff of great reads, the spicy snaps of perfectly wrought scenes.

Reading *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* is like watching a seasoned storyteller, the kind that sets up a scene without anyone realizing it and concludes with a punch line — or moral — that is unanticipated but natural, seamless.

That Westlake is able to achieve this in humorous fiction attests to his astounding craft. Writing humor is a tricky business. What one person thinks is funny may not tickle another. One of the main dangers is overdoing it, trying too hard to come up with the wry observation or turn of phrase. When that happens, it's too obvious and the story becomes a parody of itself, a dud.

When I read Donald Westlake's *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* for the first time, I found myself grinning. Those grins turned into full-face smiles that, in turn, became chuckles. I enjoyed the ride with increasing satisfaction and knew it was because of something unidentifiable, like a spice that complements everything in a dish so perfectly you can't

pick it out.

I studied *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* and began to discover the tell-tale signs of the author's technique. Westlake's zingers hit softly at first, but accumulated. Every page of the book had them quietly waiting to gratify readers, to add to the pleasure of the experience.

Since that day in the library, I've met many Westlake fans. They adore the Dortmund series for the inevitable disasters its namesake creates, faces, and overcomes. The plotting is convoluted, wonderful and, somehow, believable. But for me, it's the little things that count.

Westlake and *What's the Worst that Could Happen?* inspired me to try harder as a writer, to eschew smugness. I'm convinced I never would have been published without this push to bring something special — through zingers — to every page of my work.

What's the Worst that Could Happen? was the best thing that could happen to me.

Pari Noskin Taichert hails from Albuquerque, lived in wetter climes, and had the smarts to return home. She is the author of the Agatha-nominated *The Clovis Incident* and *The Belen Hitch*, a Book Sense Notable Mystery. Unlike Sasha Solomon her protagonist, Pari is married, has children and leads a normal life.

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