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THE TIMES

SATURDAYREVIEW

The best crime fiction for August 2021: in cold blood and hot metal

Val McDermid's newspaper shocker is her best crime thriller in years, says Mark Sanderson

Mark Sanderson

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Book of the month: 1979 by Val McDermid

Allie Burns and Danny Sullivan are ambitious young reporters on the

Daily Clarion

in Glasgow. It is not only the fag end of the 1970s — everyone smokes — but also the winter of discontent: snow, strikes and Elton John's

Song for Guy

. Their first collaboration successfully exposes an illegal tax evasion scheme used by wealthy businessmen — Danny's boastful brother, alas, loses his job as a result — but their second scoop is far more difficult to pull off. Devolution is in the air and, to adopt the language of the tabloids, "a ruthless gang of radical insurgents" — actually a bunch of harebrained dreamers — are "hell-bent on bringing terrorism to the Scottish referendum". The IRA, of course, is only too happy to help.

Val McDermid was a newshound at the time and it shows.

1979

, the first in a quintet that will continue with

1989

, is full of "the romance of print": she makes you feel the thrum of the presses beneath your feet. The newsroom crackles with competition and prejudice: Allie is the only woman on the newsdesk and Catholic Danny is a closeted gay. "Jeez," says one editor, "my bairns fight less than you lot." The tricks — harmless and otherwise — of the inky trade are depicted with relish until the story suddenly takes a tragic turn and becomes a shocking murder mystery. Returning to her old stamping ground has reinvigorated McDermid's copy: a freezing nude model, for example, has "nipples stiff as wine corks". This is her best book in years.

Little, Brown, 432pp; £20

A Narrow Door by Joanne Harris

It's not only a new academic year at St Oswald's — the posh northern grammar school first attended in

Gentlemen & Players

(2005) — but there's also a new head teacher: Rebecca Buckfast, who was the devilishly devious deputy in

Different Class

(2016). Roy Straitley, the crusty, kindly Latin master, is clinging on, despite the occasional twinge in his chest, and is immediately at odds with Buckfast when human remains are unearthed by workers constructing a swimming pool. He wants to inform the police; she, haunted by the disappearance of her older brother when she was just five years old, wants to cover the whole thing up. So what does bonkers Becky do? She poisons Straitley.

Only enough to put him in hospital, out of the way, though. The two teachers share the narrative, which flip-flops between 1989 and 2006. Becky explains how she has had to flirt and fight (dirty) every step of her career: "After the mastectomy, I refused to get implants, which means that men now look me in the face instead of a few inches lower." Roy, still overwhelmed at the possibility that his oldest friend and former lover might have been a paedophile, has to decide whether speaking out or shutting up is the best option. Joanne Harris, with her unique blend of humour and pathos, expertly controls the slow release of revelations. It turns out that everyone has secrets and everyone lies — but this brilliant novel proves "the past is never completely over". As Seneca said:

Veritas numquam perit

. The truth never dies.

Orion, 448pp; £20

The Madness of Crowds by Louise Penny

The idyllic community of Three Pines is still reeling from the effects of Covid-19 when someone tries to assassinate Professor Abigail Robinson — a controversial advocate of mercy killing for economic reasons — at the local university. Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, whose granddaughter has Down's syndrome, loathes the batty boffin but does his best to identify the would-be murderer.

It is a both a pleasure and a relief to report that, after a misguided and misbegotten trip to Paris in last year's

All the Devils Are Here

, Louise Penny is on peak form back in her native Canada.

The Madness of Crowds

is a grown-up, timely thriller that considers the nature of cowardice — "there's no peace without courage" — and how to find and defend "that spot between freedom and safety". The highly complex plot involves academic skulduggery of all kinds and such ambivalent characters as the "Asshole Saint", a doctor who combines kindness with cruelty, and the "Hero of Sudan", a spiky contender for the Nobel peace prize who escaped slavery in Africa to find fame but not freedom in the hypocritical West: "Those scars her bars." Only Donna Leon merges the personal and professional life of her detective with equal skill and wit. Leon and Penny both demonstrate that "the crime often begins long before the act".

Hodder & Stoughton, 448pp; £16.99

The Devil's Advocate by Steve Cavanagh

Randall Korn, the district attorney for Sunville County, Alabama, is responsible for more executions than any other lawyer in the history of the US. The 6ft 7in living skeleton has never looked away while a prisoner fried in the electric chair known as “Yellow Mama” (it’s covered in the same paint road crews use): “Not even when his skin began to smoke. Not even when the current fractured his left shinbone. Not even when the bloody foam erupted from his mouth.” Korn gets off on the power he has over life and death. This billionaire’s son is physically and morally corrupt (he wears a leather garter, studded with flesh-piercing pins, round his right thigh).

When, at last, Washington realises something is amiss in benighted Buckstown, who do they send to defend the latest innocent on trial for murder? Why, Eddie Flynn of course! The New York con artist turned legal magician has not only to contend with Korn and his ruthless cronies but also a gang of white-supremacist bombers led by an assassin known as The Pastor. Steve Cavanagh now has the same hotshot literary agent (Shane Salerno) as Don Winslow. Not bad for a boy from Belfast. His latest thriller may flirt with the far-fetched, but if you read the first eight pages you’ll be hooked.

The Devil’s Advocate

makes your palms sweat and your blood run cold; the terrific trial scenes out-Grisham John Grisham. Meanwhile, in the 21st century, in the land of the free, the death penalty remains a reality.

Orion, 416pp; £12.99

A Line to Kill by Anthony Horowitz

Daniel Hawthorne, a former detective, and our author Anthony Horowitz, who appears in his own novels, are on Alderney in the third of their metafictional murder mysteries — after

The Word Is Murder
(2017) and

The Sentence Is Death

(2019). They are attending the Channel Island’s first literary festival along with a satirically portrayed TV chef, children’s author and French performance poet. However, after a lavish party hosted by the festival’s sponsor — the “uniquely offensive” millionaire Charles le Mesurier — he is found bound to a chair in his “snuggery” with a paper knife in his neck. Did someone tire of his endless cutting remarks? He epitomised the enchanted isle, for example, as “2,000 alcoholics clinging to a rock”. Or was the last straw his support for a proposed power line that would blight the landscape but make him even richer?

Horowitz — “dark hair, untidy, going grey. Jewish. Late fifties” — playing Watson to Hawthorne’s Sherlock, serves up a pretty kettle of fish, full of red herrings and bottom feeders. The brutal German occupation of Alderney in the Second World War is not ignored but the tone is generally light: “She had just signed a major deal with Walt Disney, including a strict morality clause that, almost certainly, prohibited the act of murder.” The island, with its “blue telephone boxes, beaches and fortifications, sea-gulls, miniature steak and kidney puddings [and] ginger-haired taxi drivers” is described with affection. The good folk at

visitalderney.com

will be delighted.

Century, 384pp; £20

Related Images



Val McDermid, a young journalist in 1981

ALAMY

Val

THE NUMBER ONE
SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

McDermid

1979

SHE'S HUNTING FOR A STORY.
AND SOMEONE'S HUNTING HER.

THE FIRST ALLIE BURNS THRILLER

THE MULTI-MILLION BESTSELLING AUTHOR


JOANNE HARRIS

'A totally
convincing
anti-heroine'

ALEX
MICHAELIDES

'Exhilarating.
Addictive.
Fierce.'

BRIDGET
COLLINS



A NARROW DOOR

MEN WALK IN THROUGH THE MAIN GATES.
WOMEN HAVE TO IMPROVISE.

THE MULTI-MILLION-COPY
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

'One of the greatest crime writers of our times'

DENISE MINA

LOUISE
PENNY



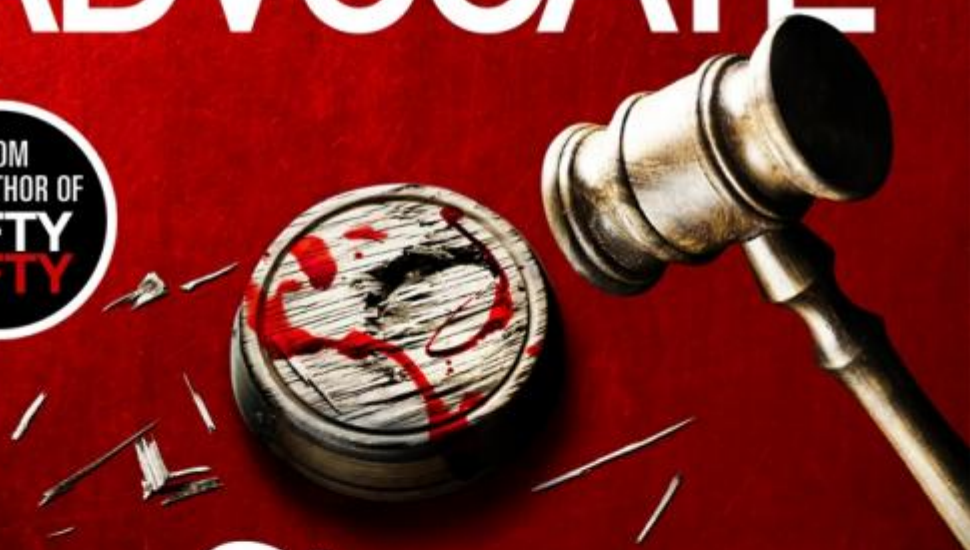
The Madness
of Crowds

'Makes most of her competitors seem like wannabes'

THE TIMES

He's won every trial ...
Because he's behind EVERY murder

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE



Steve
Cavanagh

THE MILLION COPY BESTSELLER

On a small island
everyone's a suspect

A Line To Kill

ANTHONY
HOROWITZ

Bestselling Author of *Moonflower Murders*

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