

Master of the Macabre

A Poe for the 21st century

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

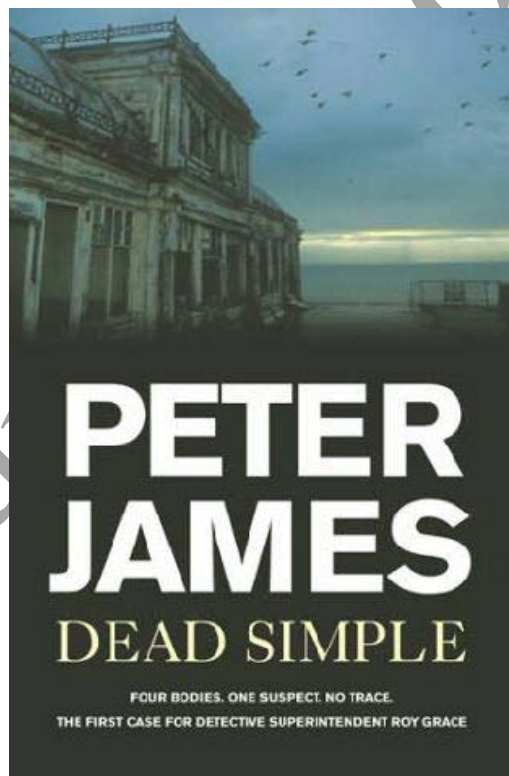
This week's pick demonstrates just how far a skilled writer can take readers into unfamiliar territory and terrifying events, and get into their minds. A gripping storyline, combined with believable characters and a strong sense of place, lift this novel out of the ranks of the commonplace and into the very top tier of contemporary crime fiction. In the process it raises an intriguing question: which is more fearful — death, or dying?

Peter James

To say that Peter James has led an interesting life would be something of an understatement. Born in 1948, James graduated from Charterhouse (a prestigious independent British school whose roots go back to the early 17th century), and Ravensbourne Film School. To date, his thirteen novels have been translated into twenty-eight languages, include number one best-sellers, and have garnered multiple international prizes. In addition to his writing credits, James has also produced several films, including *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, starring Robert De Niro, and *The Merchant of Venice*, starring Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons and Joseph Fiennes.

Since its publication *Dead Simple* has won both *Le Prix Coeur Noir* (2006) and *Le Prix Polar International* (2007). James was also awarded the *Krimi-Blintz*

prize in Germany for Best Crime Writer of the Year.



James divides his time between a Georgian manor house in Sussex and a flat in Notting Hill, London, and shares his life with Bertie and Phoebe, respectively a Hungarian Puli Sheepdog with dreadlocks and a German Shepherd with a fondness for rabbits. When not writing he collects classic and modern cars.

Dead Simple
(Pan Books, 2005)

Michael Harrison is one lucky guy. Senior partner in a successful property development firm, he's just days away from marrying the breathtakingly beautiful Ashley Harper. But before that happens, Michael's mates — Josh, Robbo, Luke and Pete — take him on a traditional Stag Night Out.

Well, maybe not quite so traditional. Three nights before Michael's wedding, after getting him pleasantly sozzled, his friends drive Michael to a remote spot in the Sussex countryside and place him in a coffin, with only a breathing tube, a girlie magazine, a flashlight, a bottle of whisky, and a walkie-talkie for company. Then they bury him in a shallow grave and set off for the nearest pub in their borrowed green transit van.

The idea, of course, is to let Michael sweat: payback time for the various practical jokes he's played on his mates in the past. But fate has a way of having the last laugh. On the road the lads taunt Michael with their walkie-talkie, the other end of his lifeline. When the driver is distracted the van is involved in a terrible road accident, a head-on crash with a large lorry. Three of the four lads are killed instantly, and the fourth winds up in hospital, comatose and on life-support. When a tow-truck driver arrives at the scene, his intellectually-challenged son Davey finds the walkie-talkie, but does not realize its significance. Afraid his father will be angry with him for keeping it, Davey hides it in his room and does not tell anyone about his puzzling new friend on the other end. And as the batteries weaken in his flashlight, Michael discovers a new horror: groundwater is infiltrating the coffin.

When Michael does not appear the following day, his fiancée learns of the road accident. She is desperate to locate Michael, but the police have little to go on. The plot thickens when Michael's business partner, Mark Warren, learns about the accident. Originally part of the scheme, he had been delayed from participating due to a business trip. Mark realizes that Michael's misfortune might be his good luck. All he has to do is profess his ignorance about Michael's disappearance, and remain silent. Assigned to what seems to be a simple missing persons case, Detective-Superintendent Roy Grace risks his superior's wrath by calling on the skills of a local clairvoyant to help find Michael before it is too late.

Maybe Michael is not so lucky after all.

An exquisitely-crafted tale

A well-paced, skillful blend of police procedural and gripping suspense. James's use of the omniscient point of view is key to his creating a sense of urgency to the plot. His gripping description of Michael's desperate attempts to escape his grave is all-too-believable:

Michael pressed the talk button.

'Davey?'

Silence.

He pressed the button again.

'Davey?'

Hello? Davey?'

White-satin silence. Complete and utter silence, coming down from above, rising up beneath him, pressing in from each side. He tried to move his arms, but as hard as he pushed them out, walls pressed back against them. He also tried to spread out his legs, but they met the same, unyielding

walls. Resting the walkie-talkie on his chest, he pushed up against the satin room inches from his eyes. It was like pushing against concrete.

Dead Simple is not for everyone — in particular readers who are claustrophobic. But get beyond that and you'll be richly rewarded with an engrossing, original, and exquisitely-crafted tale of love, trust, greed and betrayal, with an action-packed surprise ending. Peter James is a master of the macabre, a twenty-first century Edgar Allan Poe, and *Dead Simple* is quite simply one of the finest crime thrillers I've read in a very long while.

The second novel in the Roy Grace series, *Looking Good Dead* spent seven weeks among the top ten books in Britain's *Sunday Times*, and has been shortlisted for Britains' Crime Thriller of the Year. On June 1st, *Not Dead Enough*, the third novel in the Roy Grace series, is scheduled to be released.

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