

It just keeps getting better

Outstanding Crime Fiction of 2011

Suspended Sentences

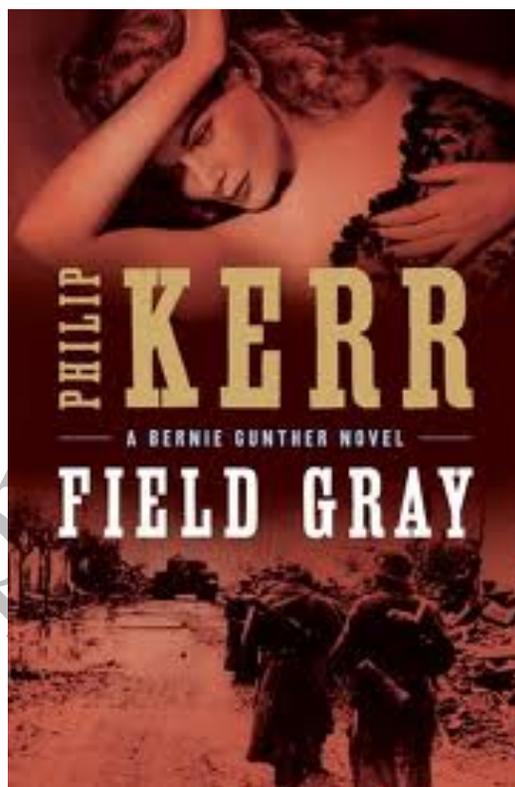
by Jim Napier

It's been a great year for crime writers—and readers! Putting a figurative gun to my head I've selected the following novels as outstanding, both for their writing and for the stories they tell. Collectively these tales attest to the thriving state of contemporary crime fiction. If you missed them earlier, here's a chance to catch up.

**Philip Kerr,
*Field Gray***

(Marion Wood Books/Putnam, 2011)

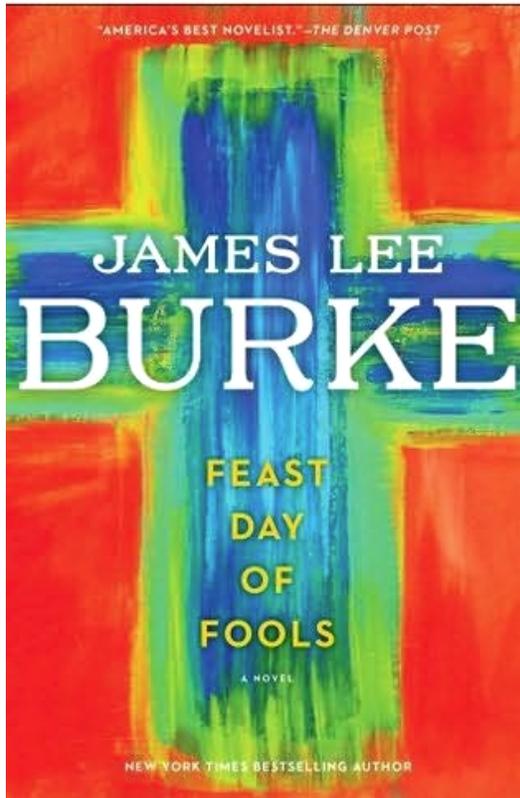
Building on his fine Berlin Noir series, Philip Kerr's latest work, *Field Gray*, features German ex-cop and PI Bernie Gunther. Not surprisingly, as the book opens Bernie is already in trouble: arrested by Americans looking for gun smugglers off the shores of Pre-Castro Cuba. Bernie is returned to Germany to face investigation for war crimes. Bernie's actions will be scrutinized by a pair of American prosecutors who have little sympathy for, and apparently even less understanding of, the exigencies of war. The balance of the tale spans a twenty-year period from the mid-30s to the mid-50s, covering the buildup to World War II, the war itself and finally its aftermath. Layer by layer, Bernie's actions during the war are laid bare to the reader, who cannot help but ask himself *what would I have done in that situation?*



Peppered with Bernie's dark humour, *Field Gray* explores at length the moral landscape of all sides during the Second World War, where it seems no one can lay claim to the high ground. Bernie's character may be ambiguous, but his questions are probing and he is not easily put off from examining in painful detail the intersection where conscience and compromise collide. Kerr explores this moral no-man's-land, offering penetrating insights without ever lapsing into an apologia.

James Lee Burke,
Feast Day of Fools
(Simon & Schuster, 2011)

In a sleepy Southwest border town, aging sheriff Hack Holland is confronted by an account of a man tortured to death in the desert. The evidence is shaky: the sole alleged eyewitness is an alcoholic ex-boxer known for having visions. But Holland is old school, and reluctantly drives out to look into things for himself.



The barren landscape harbours a rogues' gallery of misfits and miscreants, including a mysterious Chinese woman known for sheltering illegals and a born-again lay preacher wrestling with demons of his own. Holland soon learns that there are other, even less-welcome species inhabiting the remote region: a disaffected government military engineer is on the run, pursued by mercenaries eager to sell his knowledge to terrorists. FBI agents are trying to

find him as well, and a serial killer Holland had thought was dead re-surfaces. To make matters worse, Holland's female deputy is making unmistakable moves on the aging law officer. All in all, it's shaping up as a really bad week.

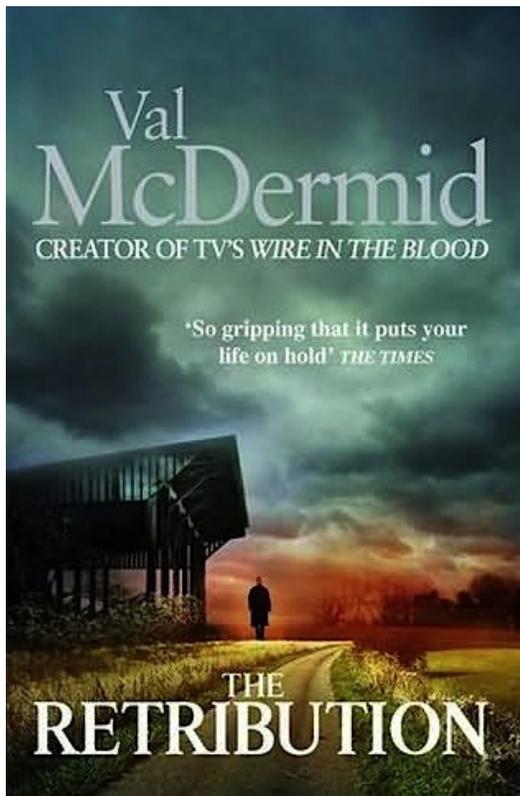
We have come to expect finely-crafted suspense tales from this award-winning author, and his latest work is no exception. Gritty, graphic and intense, *Feast Day of Fools* is a powerful, unforgettable tale of a man who, haunted by his late wife's death, is unable to forge close relationships with the living. Burke expertly mines his own considerable knowledge of the American Southwest to create a stark backdrop for a chilling tale that will remain with readers long after they've finished this book.

Val McDermid,
The Retribution
(Little, Brown/Hatchette 2011)

Jacko Vance is a brutal psychopath who murdered seventeen girls and a police officer years earlier, and forensic profiler Dr. Tony Hill and DCI Carol Jordan helped put him in prison. Facing a lifetime behind bars with no chance of parole, Vance promised himself he would escape. Now he has made good on his word and is looking to take revenge on Hill and Jordan. Factor in the inevitable screw-ups, a crime reporter determined to get a scoop, and obstructive senior officers more interested in departmental budgets and image than keeping the streets safe, and you have a lethal mix.

The Retribution is a finely layered, superbly textured novel, as good or better than any crime thriller since Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the*

Lambs. An exquisite blend of pure thriller and an evocative tale of the nuanced relation-

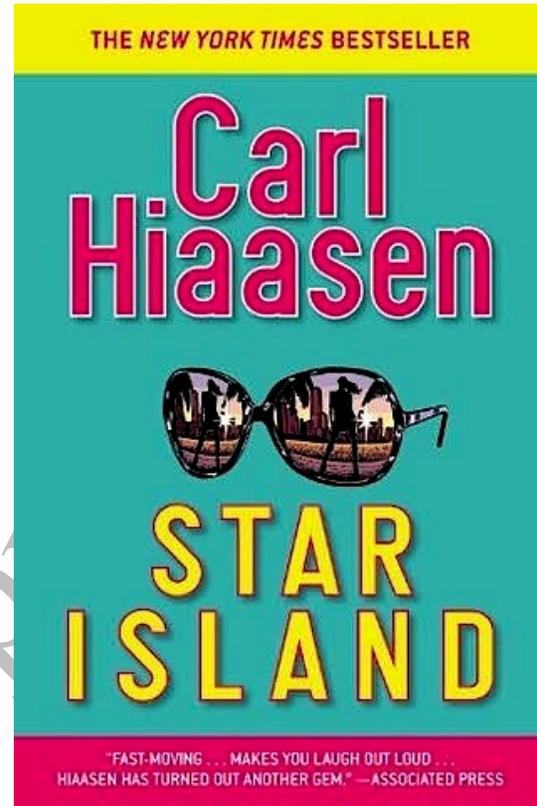


ship between Hill and Jordan, who cannot put to rest the differences – and attractions – between them, even as their lives are on the line. As we have come to expect from this accomplished author, the characterizations are spot on, the dialogue is utterly believable, and the plotting is intense, with enough suspense to satisfy even the most jaded thriller fan. A riveting tale by a master of the genre.

Carl Hiaasen,
Star Island
(Knopf, 2010)

How do you spell bizarre? Twenty-two-year-old pop star Cherry Pye is attempting to resurrect her flagging career after her latest round of drug and alcohol abuse. But things go wrong when her look-alike stand-in is

mistakenly kid-napped by an obsessed paparazzo seeking a private photo session. The task facing Cherry's handlers is somehow to get her back without the public—or Cherry—tweaking to her existence.

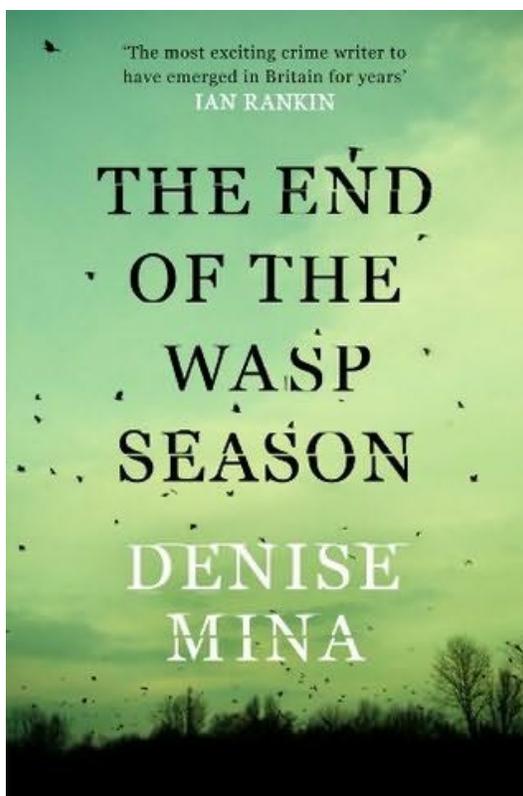


Fresh, in-your-face, and definitely over the top, *Star Island* is an example of Carl Hiaasen at his best. A deft blend of farce with social satire, if your idea of a fun read is a bit of madcap mayhem you'll find his writing as addictive as a bowl of potato chips.

Denise Mina,
The End of the Wasp Season
(McArthur & Co., 2011)

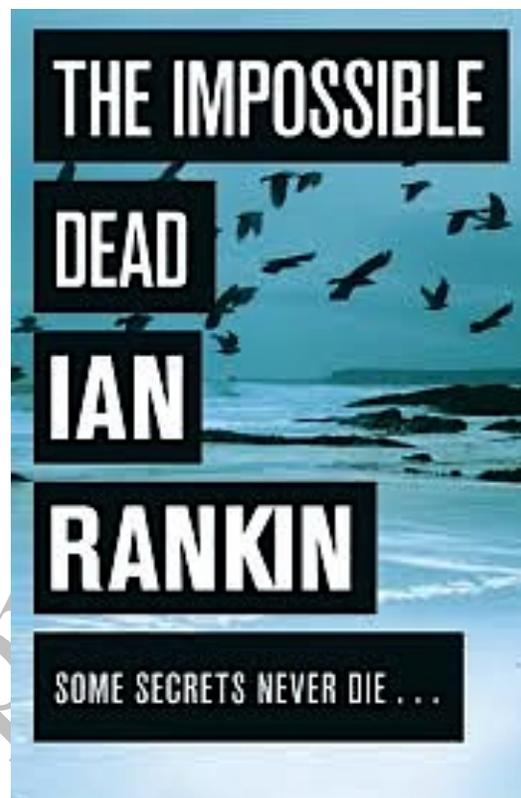
In a story that could have been ripped from the headlines, investment banker Lars Anderson hangs himself at the family home as his shaky investment empire comes crumbling down. He leaves behind a neurotic, drug-dependent

wife, a daughter curiously detached from reality, and a neglected, bitter son who's fallen in with very bad company at a private school in Scotland. An attempted burglary results in a woman being savagely beaten to death in her home, and it falls on DS Alex Morrow, pregnant with twins, to solve the cases. Complicating things, the sons of an old friend of Morrow's may be involved. When she comes to realize that the cases might be related a tale of abandoned dreams and bitterness, and neglect, avarice, and deceit unfolds. There are no heroes in this story, and few villains; but there are many victims. A cautionary tale, not so far removed from everyday reality as one might hope.



A guiding theme underlying Denise Mina's fine crime novels is why people, especially damaged people, are who they are and do what they do. *The End of the Wasp Season* is another fine addition to her already impressive portraits of life

on the margins of society. At times gritty and intense, Mina's insights are penetrating and evocative, and few readers will come away unmoved.



Ian Rankin,
The Impossible Dead
(Orion, 2011)

Detective Inspector Malcolm Fox and his team from Professional Ethics and Standards find themselves in the coastal town of Kirkcaldy, investigating some of their own. Days earlier DC Paul Carter had been found guilty of demanding sexual favours and turning a blind eye by several women. What made the case unusual is that the complaint had been lodged by the copper's uncle, a retired officer himself. In the wake of Carter's conviction several fellow officers now find themselves suspected of helping to mount a cover-up, and Fox and his team

get the predictable run-around from everyone at the station.

Not long after Fox speaks with Alan Carter, the man is found shot. The locals chalk it up to suicide, but Fox isn't buying it. He had been working on a cold case in which a lawyer had been killed in 1985: assumed to be the victim of a car crash on a lonely rural road, a bullet hole had been found in the lawyer's head at the hospital. Too many coincidences for Fox. His investigation will take him back to a different era, in which paramilitary groups were plotting Scottish independence, and carry for-

ward again to the present day, when militants have moved on and established other, more respectable lives.

The Impossible Dead is like a Chinese puzzle in 3D, intricate and layered and as good as it gets. As Fox works his way through a labyrinth of lies and deceptions he teases out the relation between a gun that should not exist and a young woman who was never alive. Once again Rankin demonstrates how nuanced characters and a finely paced plot can hold its own against nonstop, mindless violence any day.

Jim Napier is a crime fiction reviewer for the *Sherbrooke Record* and the *Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph*. His reviews and interviews have also appeared on the websites *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, and *January* magazine, and his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

