

# Short, not always sweet

## *Short-story crime fiction on the rise*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

**T**he author Mark Twain once received a telegram from a magazine editor that read: NEED TWO-PAGE SHORT STORY IN TWO DAYS. Twain's reply was memorable: NO CAN DO TWO PAGES IN TWO DAYS. CAN DO THIRTY PAGES IN TWO DAYS. NEED THIRTY DAYS TO DO TWO PAGES.

Twain's response highlights a little-understood fact about writing short fiction. While most readers might think it's easier to write a short story than a novel, the fact is, it's generally much more challenging.

Think about it. Over a span of three-to-four-hundred pages an author has a lot of scope: he or she can set the mood of a story, introduce characters over several scenes, gradually revealing their personalities and planting clues along with red herrings in ways that the reader (hopefully) will not notice until the solution is revealed. A full-length story thus becomes an elaborate mix of complex characters, conflicting motivation, set against a rich tapestry that is the background for the tale.

In contrast, a short story writer is like a master of Japanese brush-painting: he or she must reveal the salient points in a few strokes, relying on suggestion and subtle nuance in the reader's mind to complete the picture. In only a few pages — perhaps twenty, perhaps as few as two) — the writer must pose a problem (the mystery), introduce char-

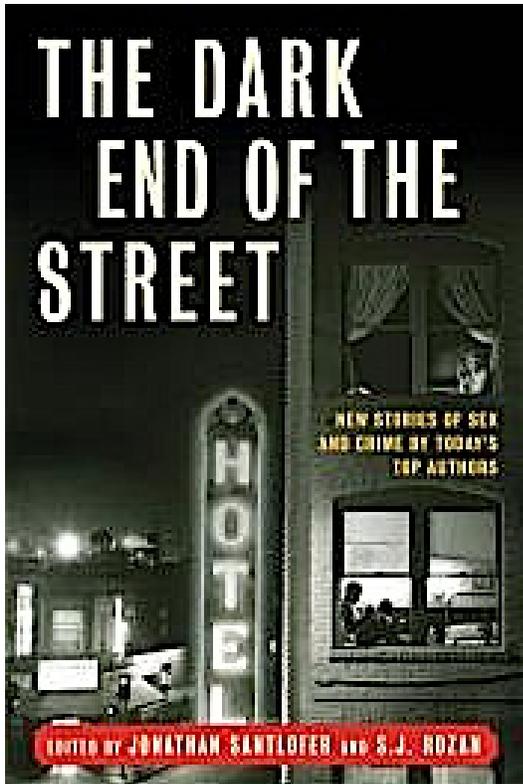
acters, reveal their relationships with one another, plant the clues and reveal the solution to the crime! A daunting task, and one that not all successful novelists can carry off.

This week's picks include three works in which crime fiction short stories really come into their own. Two are anthologies containing unrelated tales by well-known authors; the other is a dozen tales centering on four generations of the same family, by a single author who specializes in short fiction. All remind us that modern crime fiction did not emerge full-blown in novel form, but appeared first as a series of brief tales, often serialized in magazines, from the pens of such icons as Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle.

### *The Dark End of the Street*

Edited by Jonathan Santlofer  
and S. J. Rozen  
(Bloomsbury, 2010)

Novelists Santlofer and Rozen have assembled an impressive list of stories from some of the biggest names in the business—writers at the top of their form, including Lawrence Sanders, Stephen L. Carter, Lee Child, Laura Lippman, Michael Connelly, Val McDermid, and Joyce Carol Oates, to name only a few. They have contributed a wide range of tales focusing on one of the oldest themes in literature: the relation between sex and crime. The characters span the range from cheating



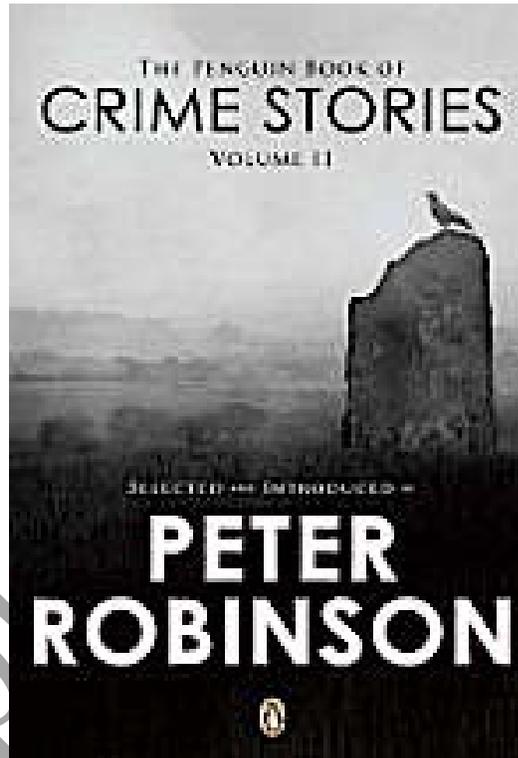
spouses to Don Juans to serial killers, the settings varying from pick-up bars and strip joints to suburban homes and churchyards. They centre on ordinary people and those who personify evil, and span the gamut of gender relations as well. With themes running from personal lust to professional ambition, and with a tone ranging from the light-hearted to the ominous, if you are an observer of the human scene you will find something of interest in this diverse collection of tales.

***The Penguin Book of Crime Stories, Volume II***

Edited by Peter Robinson  
(Penguin Canada, 2010)

Peter Robinson is well-known as the creator of eighteen novels and several short stories set in Yorkshire and featuring the exploits Inspector Alan Banks, a best-selling series that has also netted him an Arthur Ellis Award,

an Anthony Award, and an Edgar Award. In this, his third collection of short stories, he has garnered some of the best and brightest as contributors. Robinson's cohorts in crime include Reginald Hill, Colin Cotterill, Lee Child,



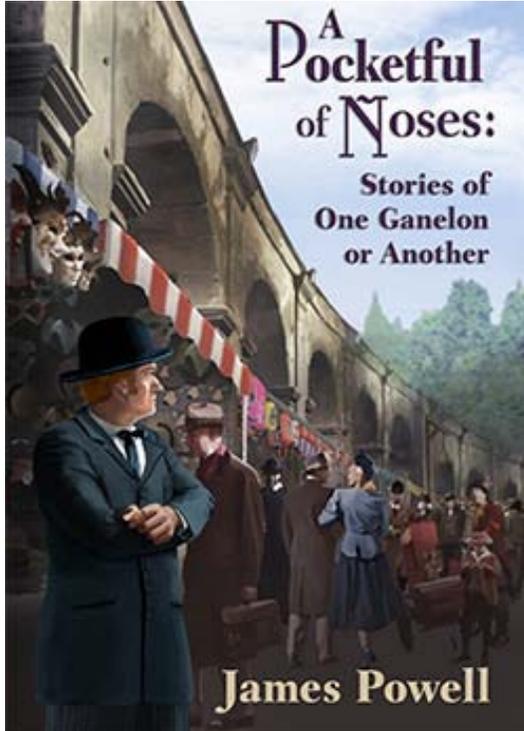
Maureen Jennings, Ruth Rendell, James Powell, Jeffrey Deaver, Sue Grafton – well, you get the idea. The tales are as varied as their authors, making this collection a keeper. From the opening line, or “hook”, to the ingenious resolution of these tales, they offer timely lessons in how to spin a captivating story within a very few pages. Highly recommended.

***A Pocketful of Noses***

By James Powell  
(Crippen & Landru, 2009)

Even compared to his prolific colleagues in crime-writing, James Powell is something of a phenomenon: author of some 130 short-stories, he has been nominated several times for crime-

writing honours. In 1989 Powell received the Ellery Queen Readers' Award; in 2003 he garnered the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Short Story; and in 2006 he earned the Grant Allen Award



at the Wolfe Island *Scene of the Crime* festival. In *A Pocketful of Noses* Powell follows the Ganelon family, four generations of private detectives named Ambrose Ganelon, and who make their home in the small principality of San Sebastiano, located on the Riviera. In twelve tales that showcase his trademark off-the-wall (and sometimes dark) humour, Powell chronicles their exploits dating from the scheming of Ganelon's fiendish arch-enemy Ludwig Fong in the mid-nineteenth century through the intrigues of World War One, on to the puzzle facing the third generation of Ganelons which he learns that he is the target of a murder plot, and culminating in the challenges faced by Ambrose Ganelon IV. Definitely *not* your grandmother's bedtime reading, but totally captivating.

Together, these three collections hint at the broad diversity of short crime fiction that's available these days. Not as easy as it looks to master, short-story writing would seem to be made for our increasingly frenetic lifestyle, when leisure time is at a premium and reading material is often savoured over a coffee-break or office lunch. But as these tales demonstrate, the best short crime fiction can be every bit as rewarding as a full-length work, and leave us thirsting for more. Happy reading!

Jim Napier can be reached at [jim.napier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jim.napier@deadlydiversions.com)