

# Serial Silliness

## *Thriller combines humour and homicide*

by Jim Napier

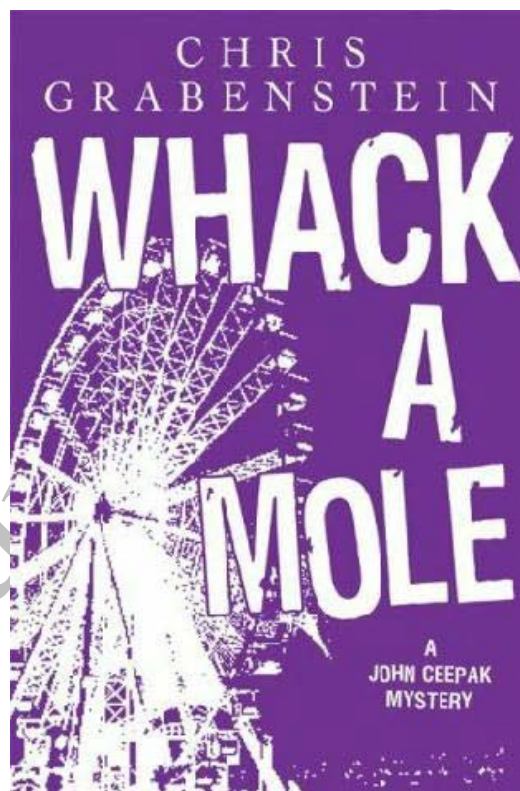
**W**hen is a rose not a rose? When it is a crime thriller laced with sardonic humour.

In this week's pick a serial killer has returned to his macabre calling in a tranquil seaside resort town, twenty-five years after claiming his first victim. But this is not your run-of-the-mill thriller; it's a witty look at the lighter side of police work, featuring a by-the-book investigator juxtaposed with uniformed cops of the shoot-first-ask-questions-later variety. The result is a hilarious send-up of small-town policing that still manages to hook the reader with a challenging and action-packed tale that will delight readers, especially those with (should I say it?) an arrested sense of development.

### *Chris Grabenstein*

Chris Grabenstein is another one of those "men for all seasons." Born in Buffalo in 1955, Chris studied Communications at the University of Tennessee before turning his hand to performing live: in the early 1980s he and Bruce Willis were in a Greenwich Village comedy troupe together. Forsaking the stage for a behind-the-scenes career, Chris then spent almost twenty years writing commercials for some of America's top advertising agencies. After finishing his advertising career as an Executive Vice President/Group Creative Director at the highly regarded firm of Young & Rubicam in New York City, he went on to write screenplays, made-

for-TV movies, and scripts for *The Muppets*.



Chris won the Anthony Award for Best First Mystery in 2005 for his debut novel *Tilt A Whirl*—the first in the series of John Ceepak stories to be set in a New Jersey tourist town called Sea Haven, later optioned for a Hollywood film. His second novel, *Mad Mouse*, was described as one of the "Ten Best Mysteries of 2006" by Kirkus Reviews.

*Whack A Mole*, the third novel in the John Ceepak series, came out to great critical acclaim in 2007. Disturbingly, Chris also writes ghost stories for kids...

Chris lives with his wife J.J., their dog Fred, and their cat Tiger Lilly in Manhattan. Every other day Chris can be seen running around Central Park with Fred tethered to a belt leash, racking up four to five miles together. Some people will do anything to avoid writing...

### ***Whack a Mole***

(Carrol and Graf/Avalon, 2007)

Sea Haven, New Jersey is a beachfront resort: think Coney Island on a small scale. Attracting a mix of family types, retirees, and young partygoers, life revolves around small museums and souvenir shops, bars, the boardwalk arcade and deep-sea fishing charters. Criminal doings in the placid community are mostly limited to missing wallets and underage drinking. Big-city crime is almost unknown. That is, until John Ceepak comes to town.

John Ceepak is a six-foot-two, thirty-something cop, ex-marine, and former Eagle Scout who is on duty even when he is off duty. When he's watching TV, it's tuned to reruns of *CSI*; when he's on the beach, it's with a metal detector in hand, uncovering lost trinkets from beneath the sand so he can return them to their owners. Even off-duty Ceepak's speech is peppered with expressions like 'Affirmative' and 'Roger that' and 'Ten-four'. When he adopts a dog, it is—what else?—a shelter mutt, which he promptly names Barkley. Other than that, John Ceepak has no discernable sense of humour, and is utterly incapable of telling a lie, even a small one. In short, Ceepak is a living reincarnation of Sergeant Joe Friday (remember *Dagnet*?) His partner is the narrator of the tale, Danny Boyle. Only recently taken on by the Sea Haven Police as a junior officer, he has been assigned to

his by-the-book superior to learn the ropes. It is a daunting task. He is constantly asking himself: What would Ceepak do?

Working the beach one day with his metal detector, Ceepak finds a high school class ring, and being the straight arrow that he is, tracks down its owner to return it. It turns out the man hadn't lost it at all, but gave it to a girlfriend, Lisa DeFranco, during the summer of 1983, when they were both in high school. Bent on returning it to the woman, Ceepak locates her mother, only to find that Lisa disappeared twenty-eight years earlier.

When a family of tourists complain about a 'sick' exhibit in a local museum, the officers investigate. They find two jars; each contains a human ear. One has a label: *Ruth. Summer, 1985*; the other label has simply a date: *Summer, 1983*. But there's an earring ominously spelling out the owner's name: *Lisa*.

With the town's economy based on tourism, the police chief is understandably anxious to keep the grisly discoveries quiet, and assigns Ceepak and Danny to the case. Before long they make a second grim discovery: a jar in a souvenir shop yields a human nose, removed with surgical precision. The label says only *Miriam, 1980*.

Not soon afterwards a local charter-boat captain stumbles across a human skull buried in a Tupperware bin on the public beach. The container includes a map leading to another skull, which leads them to another. By the time they have finished, Ceepak and Danny have unearthed no less than seven sets of human remains, each dating from the 1980's. It is the final discovery, though, that makes their blood run cold: there are no body parts; instead there is only a photograph

of yet another young woman, dated that very day. It seems the serial killer is poised to return to his evil ways.

When Ceepak's girlfriend goes missing, it is clear that the killer is taunting the officer. With several lives hanging in the balance, Danny Boyle must ask himself once more: What would Ceepak do?

***Refreshingly original***

A witty, often sly poke at by-the-book policing and the pathos that underlies contemporary life in America, *Whack A Mole* is a refreshingly original, atmospheric, fast-paced tale. Grabenstein's distinctive voice is laced with black humour, which leavens an otherwise grim plot and leaves readers wanting more. An altogether delightful discovery; I recommend it highly.

The next novel in the John Ceepak series, *Hell Hole*, is scheduled to appear this August.



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