

Nautical Noir

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

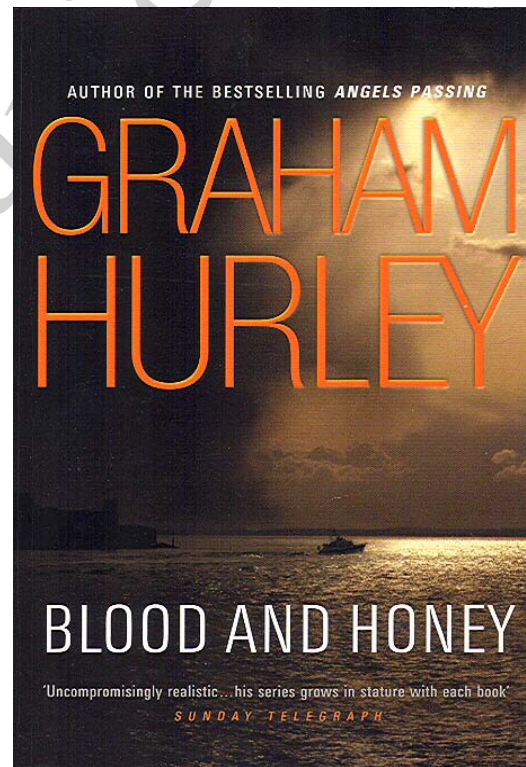
I've said it before: crime writing has long since passed into the mainstream of literary fiction. Having their way paved by such respected and successful novelists as P.D. James and Ian Rankin, emerging talents are knocking at the gates, demanding to be let in; and increasingly their works are finding a home in university lit courses no less than on the shelves of committed mystery buffs. This week's pick is an example of fine crime writing.

Graham Hurley

Born in Clacton-on-Sea in Essex, England in 1946, Graham Hurley read English at Cambridge University. No stranger to crime fiction, Graham has penned sixteen novels to date. He has also written four full-length works of non-fiction, and has scripted various plays and screen-plays, including a six-part TV series, *Rules of Engagement*.

A skilled writer, Graham asserts that the key to producing quality fiction is to strike "that tricky balance between interior monologue and exterior action" to create a story that will engage the reader at various levels. Drama, he suggests disarmingly, is simply "character expressed in action." Marked by his publisher early in his career as a writer of thrillers, Graham traveled to such war-torn venues as Angola to invest his novels with a gritty realism. The result of his commitment to authenticity and detail show in Graham's stand-alone

works, each of which draws on a real-world conflict. *Reaper* centers on events in Northern Ireland; *The Devil's Breath* explores the shadowy world of international terrorism; *Thunder in the Blood* chronicles the Desert Storm campaign; and the minefields of Southern Africa serve as the backdrop for *The Perfect Soldier*. Equally, Graham's Joe Faraday stories are a fusion of plot twists, complex characters, and a strong sense



of place, wrapped up in a totally authentic police procedural.

Turning out a chapter a day leaves the talented wordsmith about six months of

the year free to pursue such sustaining activities as wind-surfing and searching for the perfect chicken Bhuna. Life is tough.

Graham and his wife Lin have three grown sons and, together with their wayward cat Rommie, live in the Portsmouth area of southern England, where his Joe Faraday series is set.

Blood and Honey
(Orion Books, 2006)

Detective Inspector Joe Faraday has been called from Bournemouth to the Isle of Wight to help investigate the death of a young male from the mainland who, it was rumoured, was part of the local drug scene. The case seems routine, but whilst he is looking into it a more intriguing challenge arises: a corpse has washed up on a local shore, minus its head. It's been in the sea long enough that fingerprints are no longer an option; and lacking the head, dental records are equally a non-starter.

Meanwhile Detective Constable Paul Winter and his colleague, DC Suttle, are staking out an apartment in the seaside village of Old Portsmouth, where, allegedly, cocaine changes hands. When they enter the upscale flat they find more than they bargained for: in addition to the snowy white powder they discover rooms with inflatable rubber mat-tresses, a pit bull chained in the corner, and a bank of videotapes. In graphic detail the tapes chronicle the sexual adventures of well-heeled visitors to the flat, and in an adjoining room the detectives discover Maddox, a striking young woman who features prominently in several of the videos. She is articulate, unrepentant, and completely unintimidated by the police. When a man in one of the videos is identified as London high-flyer Maurice Wishart, Winter picks up his

ears, and when it's revealed that Wishart paid the rent on the flat, the routine drug-bust takes on new interest.

Winter's commitment to his work, however, is overshadowed by a growing personal concern. He has been suffering severe headaches for some time; lately they have become much worse, punctuated by periods of vomiting, blurred vision and even blindness. He postpones dealing with the problem, fearing the worst, his growing reliance on whisky to dull the pain only making matters worse.

Meanwhile, on the island DI Faraday's quest to identify the headless corpse leads him to an old folks home, where an elderly woman says she hasn't seen her grandson, Chris Unwin, for some time. The owner of the home, one Rob Pelly, is ex-military, and a walking time-bomb. Rumour is he and Unwin had words. Had the exchange turned violent? Was the headless corpse Unwin's?

Faraday's quest will lead him to a world of Bosnian refugees, a missing boat, and to Pelly's wife, a very frightened young woman with a child and memories no one should have to experience. Whilst this is going on, DC Winter wrestles with his own demons, becoming emotionally entwined with Wishart's call-girl, Maddox, even as he strives to bring the man down.

A richly-textured police procedural

Blood and Honey skillfully explores the sordid worlds of nursing homes and high-priced hookers, asylum seekers and foreign war zones, inner fears about mortality and the need for succor and support. Combining an unerring sense of place with a fine ear for dialogue in a meticulously-researched police procedural full of twists and turns, Graham

Hurley offers us a richly textured, penetrating study of damaged people, exquisitely told. Hurley has been compared to Ian Rankin, and not without reason. If you enjoy original and challenging tales of flawed anti-heroes striving to prevail in a corrupt world, pick up this nautical noir.

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