

Time and again

Mysteries-with-history in vogue

Suspended Sentences

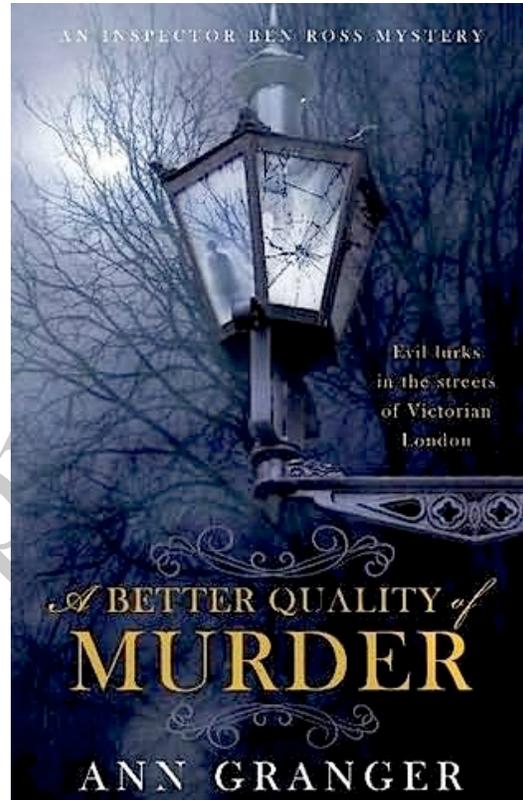
by Jim Napier

It's the way of the world: the longer a person lives, the more the events they have lived through come to be viewed as history — to be studied, perhaps, and then largely forgotten. But as Santayana observed, those who ignore the past are fated to repeat its mistakes, and beyond that, such events often make for compelling reading.

This week's column mostly deals with people, places and events that go back beyond living memory: Victorian-era London, New York during the Great Depression, Moscow in the 1930s, Italy during the closing years of World War II. Except for the latter they are unlikely to stir any personal recollections among readers, and then, perhaps, only among a few. Yet we know enough about these times to be intrigued, and skilled authors draw upon these backdrops to capture our imaginations and set original, entertaining, even compelling tales. On offer this week, a few of the very best.

Ann Granger,
A Better Quality of Murder
(Headline, 2010)

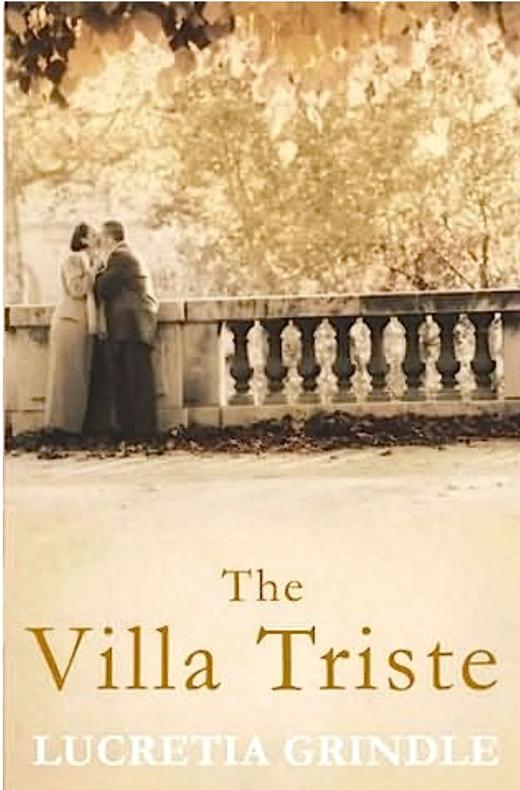
Hard to imagine it's been four years since I last reviewed a Ben-and-Lizzie Ross Victorian mystery. Chalk that up to author Ann Granger having several other intriguing series on the go at the same time. No matter; in this third installment in the series, Lizzie and her husband, Scotland Yard Inspector Ben Ross, return in an intriguing puzzle



involving a mysterious figure known as the River Wraith, responsible for terrorising young women and disappearing into the night. When a beautiful young Italian woman is found strangled in Green Park near Buckingham Palace, the press and public fear that the shadowy spectre has escalated his violence, and she is his latest victim. Although the woman's husband is a respected art dealer, her movements that day are traced to an exclusive jewelry shop where she had left a valuable brooch. Ben Ross is driven to wonder why a woman of means was prepared to

part with a family keepsake, and what led her to enter Green Park on a fateful foggy day.

A master of her craft, Granger has penned an engrossing and intricate tale that perfectly captures the manners of the day and the murky atmosphere of Victorian London. If you're a fan of Victorian-era mysteries, by all means give her works a try; you won't be disappointed.



Lucretia Grindle,
The Villa Triste
(MacArthur & Co., 2010)

Italy, during the Autumn of 1943. In the first great amphibious assault of World War II the Allies have just invaded the mainland through landings at Sicily and Salerno, and the autocratic reign of Benito Mussolini is finally coming to a close. The Italians have surrendered, but the Germans fight on, prepared to lay

waste to the Italian landscape in a desperate bid to stave off defeat.

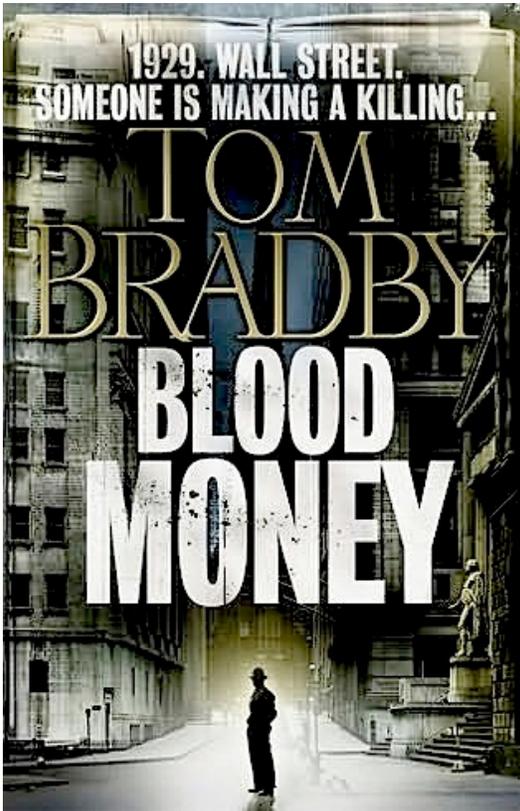
A loosely-knit but determined band of Italian patriots emerge from the shadows to combat the fascists and help the Allies. Many of the Resistance are women, the *Partigiane Combattate*, or Partisan Fighters. When the Allied offensive bogs down the partisans see an opportunity to confront their German masters, and two sisters in Florence who have so far managed to distance themselves from the war find themselves inexorably drawn into the conflict.

Now, over sixty years later, Allesandro Pallioti, a senior officer with the Polizia di Stato, finds himself investigating the death of an elderly recluse who had been involved in liberating Florence from its German oppressors. Considered a hero for his wartime exploits, the man has been killed with a single shot to the back of his head while kneeling, his mouth stuffed with salt. As a senior officer Pallioti would not normally involve himself in individual cases, but the mayor implores him to oversee the case, and he is intrigued. His efforts will lead him back across time to the events that engulfed the sisters so many years earlier, and whose consequences have spilled over into the present day.

With convincing characters set against a nuanced plot, *The Villa Triste* is a fine, layered novel that perfectly captures the moral ambiguities of war. Shortlisted for the prestigious CWA Silver Dagger for her previous novel, *The Night-spinners*, look for much more to come from this talented author.

**Tom Bradby, *Blood Money*
(Bantam Press, 2009)**

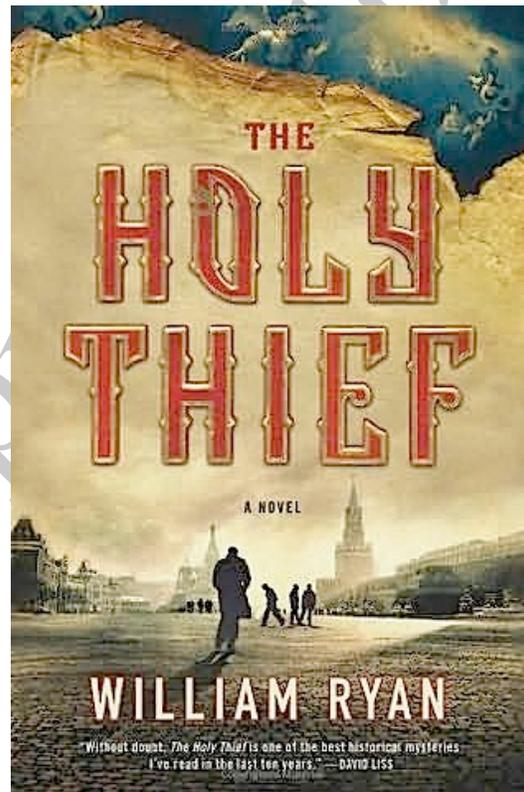
News of the day: on Wall Street, the bubble has burst. Stockbrokers are taking headers out of their office windows, and ordinary, hard-working folks are waking up to find that their retirement nest-egg has gone the way of the Dodo.



But hold on. It's not 2008; it's Prohibition-era 1929, and there's no social safety-net to help cushion the fall. There's more than enough anger to go around, and outraged investors are searching for someone to blame. When NYPD cop Joe Quinn looks into the case of a banker who took the plunge from a tall building, it's not long before he learns that the victim was not alone: several of his buddies have suffered similarly gruesome fates. Each of the men knew Lucky Luciano, a notorious underworld boss. Are their deaths due to mob connections? Quinn battles a

skeptical and uncaring boss as his leads take him back to his own father, a well-known cop in the Big Apple, and to a woman he's struggled to forget.

Gritty, fast-paced action narrated in a blunt, hard-boiled style by an author who can count three previous novels shortlisted for crime-writing awards, *Blood Money* is a taut, compelling, atmospheric tale that dares you to put it down unfinished.



**William Ryan, *The Holy Thief*
(Minotaur Books, 2010)**

Moscow, during the turbulent times of Joseph Stalin. In a deconsecrated church, the body of an American woman has been discovered, grotesquely defiled and displayed on the altar for everyone to see. The investigating officer, Captain Alexei Korolev, is apprehensive, and rightly so: the victim's nationality means that the NKVD—Russia's feared secret police—will be watching his

conduct of the case, and a misstep could end his career or worse. His superior, General Popov, is adamant: he wants the person responsible for the heinous crime, consequences be damned. But when Korolev returns to his desk a superior officer in the NKVD reminds him that the needs of the state take precedence over everything else. In the mentality of the NKVD, everyone, inside and outside the government, is a potential threat. Not, then, an enviable position for a young officer with his career in front of him.

Korolev follows the victim's trail into the murky realm of the Moscow underworld; and before he emerges there will be more bodies, and Korolev's own life will be placed in jeopardy. Equally gravely, he will be forced to confront his most basic political and moral beliefs, a challenge not without its perils in Stalin's Russia.

The Holy Thief marks an auspicious debut, and will appeal both to thriller fans and those with an historical bent. The tale is well conceived, impeccably researched, and articulately-written, with a compelling hook at the outset and a convincing plot. Readers will come away impressed.

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