

## CrimeFest

# My Most Enjoyable Panels

by Jennifer S Palmer

### Forgotten Authors: The Golden Age of Murder

This is now a hardy perennial at Crimefest and one greatly enjoyed by many attendees. The authors represented on this occasion were **Josephine Tey** (speaker **Catherine Aird**), **J.J. Connington** and **Henry Wade** (**John Curran**), **Freeman Wills Crofts** and **G. K. Chesterton** (**Dolores Gordon-Smith**), **Margery Allingham** and **Ronald Knox** (**Aline Templeton**) and **G.D.H. and Margaret Cole** and **Milward Kennedy** (participating moderator **Martin Edwards**).

As can be seen from the list above these forgotten authors differ greatly in their degree of obscurity!! The panel and the people in the audience seemed agreed that G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown is not forgotten nor is Josephine Tey (particular mention should be made of the *Daughter of Time* about Richard III); very considerable support also existed in support of Margery Allingham as a known and in print author.

The other authors vary in their degree of obscurity and in the views of their work. Henry Wade for John Curran is a good writer but his comments echoed those made about the other lesser known writers - that they plotted well but often were rather pedestrian writers of character or dialogue. The descriptions of these writers certainly left one interested in reading or re-reading some of their books.

### In The Spotlight - the Chief Constable who became Director-General of MI 5 by Frances Brody

The 20 minute presentations that take place concurrently with the main panels on Friday are often little gems and this one was no exception. Frances, whose books are set in the 1920s, had found the autobiography of Sir Percy in a library sale for 10p and thought it would provide background material for her books. She got more than she bargained for since he proved to be a man of sterling qualities with a fascinating career spanning 1900 to 1953. He followed a stint in the army in Rhodesia and as a political officer in the Colonial Service by employment as Chief Constable in, successively, Chesterfield, Sheffield, Glasgow and Kent- working to counteract organised crime in all these areas with great success. Many ideas such as Flying squads and the employment of women police officers were developed by Sir Percy. His career ended with the post of head of MI 5, offered to him by PM Attlee, and fulfilled by Sir Percy until his retirement in 1953. Remember the Secret Service problems that he faced - Fuchs, Burgess and Maclean certainly come to mind!

He found dealing with MI5 hard since its employees were reluctant to even talk to him but he persevered. Sillitoe as Attlee wrote in the book's preface was "a man who exhibits the qualities which have made the British policeman the protector not the oppressor of society."

Where else but Crimefest could you attend a talk on such a significant example of ability?

### Detective Duos

This was a sparkling panel of writers with unconventional pairs of detectives in their books. Presumably it was for that reason that they were combined on this particular panel.

In her comic mystery novels **Ruth Dudley Edwards** has Robert Amiss and Baroness 'Jack' Troutbeck, a young man and a bisexual woman 40 years older than him and 2 stones heavier. She does not, therefore, envisage any sexual relationship between them and bemoans the fact that she has too many characters in the books - she didn't expect to write a series and finds herself trailing them from book to book trying to get rid of them!!

Luca Veste is an Italian- Liverpoolian who enjoys presenting the 'whinging Scousers - both regular and Italian - and has as protagonists Laura Rossi a sharp, feisty Detective Sergeant and Detective Inspector Murphy a man with many demons - murdered parents, a broken marriage and a failed case - they make a clever and dangerous team. Veste presents dark, disturbing, violent, shocking cases to his detectives and enjoys putting in a level of moral ambiguity.

**Hans Olav Lahlum**, a Norwegian writer, gives us K2 ( a detective inspector in Oslo) and Patricia ( an acerbic young woman confined to a wheelchair, who picks K2's brain and tells him what to investigate) who deal with the murder of a Resistance hero in a classic locked room mystery. He has to contend with a reputation as the Norwegian Agatha Christie but can cope with that sobriquet. His nightmare is that he will find himself writing the same book over and over again! He has not done so and his picture of 1960s Norway is cleverly done.

**Emily Winslow** uses multiple narrators in her complex plot structures as DI Cole Froemann and her partner DCI Morris Keene try to find out what has happened and who is responsible. Keene gets a serious hand injury in book one which means that he cannot use it so his inability and the guilt aroused in his DI cause complex problems in the following books. As Emily remarked the difficulty in writing further books is to discover what made the first book publishable but, of course, you don't really know what that is!

Caro Ramsay, the moderator of this panel, has written very atmospheric novels set in Glasgow with believably normal female cops working in a team with interesting relationships. She did a superb job of bringing out the fascinating attitudes of her panel members.

### **Spies: When Snooping is Your Business**

When the Cold War ended there was talk about spy novel writers being out of a job but spy stories have been around for a long time (back to the Bible!) and spying has often been called the second oldest profession. The four writers on the panel illustrate clearly that spy stories are not dead as each generation of writers reinvents the genre.

**Adam Brookes** (previously a BBC correspondent) has written a first spy novel set in modern China with the febrile atmosphere of China and of Washington DC making a magnificently exciting background. He told a story of a Chinese ploy used in Washington where hard drives were left in Starbucks stores in the hope that people would take them and insert them in their USB ports - to deal with this duct tape was stuck over all the USB ports in the Pentagon! His comments on the modern situation were fascinating, for example, U.S. officials cannot take computers into China, they are given Blackberries which are scrapped when they return.

**Alan Judd** (he has army and Foreign Office experience) was led into writing spy fiction by the way people spoke of spy stories by le Carre as real and by Fleming as imaginary when for him both worlds are unreal. He sees the reality of the spy world as the experiences of ordinary people with loyalty and humour - "spies are us." He regards the human being as the vulnerable point in spying not the unbreakable code machines. He comments that fake passports cannot be used anymore by spies because the spy would have no technological past. He also distrusts polygraph tests adducing the tale of a policeman given a list a women's names with expectation that the name he would respond to would be that of his wife- it wasn't!!

**Mick Herron** prefers to avoid technology since all information is eminently stealable! He also prefers not to do research since he is interested in plausibility not accuracy, he added that fashions do change in the genre reminding us of the comment in an earlier era that "gentlemen do not read each other's letters." On the subject of ethics in spying he referred to the use of unethical methods by Smiley to achieve success in the novel *Smiley's People*.

**Shona MacLean**, who has previously written historical mysteries about Alexander Seaton in Scotland, has a new series beginning with a Cromwellian enforcer in in 1650s London called Damien Seeker. She initially intended a book about coffee houses in the 1650s but it became a spy novel. She feels that the febrile atmosphere of London then does show similarities to Washington DC now - the issue then was the fear of a Royalist restoration. Then, as now, spies had various motives including the desire for money and for the protection of their own hides by betraying others. At the end of this session a questioner caused great annoyance amongst the numerous women in the audience by suggesting that women preferred psychological books like *Gone Girl* to spy novels!

### **Short and Sweet: Crime Fiction in Small Packages**

An excellent discussion of short stories by **Robert Olen Butler**, **Martin Edwards**, **Christine Poulson** and **Andrew Taylor** was led by **John Harvey**. We started with the example of a perfect short story by Hemingway *For sale baby shoes, never worn*.

Certainly up to the 1920s crime stories were mainly short stories. As the panel suggested every word counts in a short story, nothing can be hidden and the whole needs to be tightly plotted. All had unusual examples to give us. Robert Olen Butler had a story based on a New York photo which actually gave rise to several full length tales. Andrew Taylor has published recently the story of a female rat in a London cemetery and Christine has written from the point of view of a fish. Martin Edwards achieved a 100 word story in the form of a book index. Elmore Leonard was quoted as saying that a short story could be " taking characters for a walk around the block to see if they would work in a novel."

### **Emerging Indie Voices**

The first such panel last year was so successful that another was held. Without going into great detail it is worth noting the absolute enthusiasm of all the panellists. The moderator was, again, **Joanna Penn**, who conveyed her enthusiasm magnificently. It is based on solid results - the writers, **Celina Grace**, **Chris Longmuir**, **J.J. Marsh** and **Nick Stephenson**, had, between them, sold over half a million books in 66 countries, in print, audio and ebook forms and 4 languages! All valued the creative control they gained. All felt that they were able to employ all the editing and presentation professionals they needed and that they had great contact with their readers through forums. The interesting thing to me is that they cover all aspects of crime writing often on the edges of genres. They offered as topics people who disappear, the underbelly of society, forensics, religion and superstition, morality tales and strong roles for women.