

November 30, 2007

BOOKS**A Season for Sleuthing**By **TOM NOLAN**

November 30, 2007; Page W8

Christmas has once again inspired mystery writers to craft season-themed stories of loss and of hope, of suffering and redemption, and even to hint, at times, at the greater mysteries of creation. Publishers, doing their part, have once again put together mystery-themed books for seasonal giving, collecting classics and offering, in book form, the backstory to the lives of classic storytellers.

DETAILS**A Christmas Beginning**

By Anne Perry
 (Ballantine, 190 pages, \$17.95)

A Fatal Grace

By Louise Penny
 (St. Martin's Minotaur, 314 pages, \$23.95)

Death at the Old Hotel

By Con Lehane
 (Thomas Dunne, 230 pages, \$24.95)

Voices

By Arnaldur Indridason
 (Thomas Dunne, 313 pages, \$23.95)

Christmas Stories

Edited by Diana Secker Tesdell
 (Everyman's Library, 395 pages, \$15)

Hammett's Moral Vision

By George J. "Rhino" Thompson
 (Vince Emery Productions, 246 pages, \$24.95)

The Long Embrace

By Judith Freeman
 (Pantheon, 353 pages, \$25.95)

The Black Lizard Big Book of Pulps

Edited by Otto Penzler
 (Vintage Crime, 1,150 pages, \$25)



The remote Isle of Anglesey, off the Welsh coast, is the chilly setting of Anne Perry's suspenseful but heartening "**A Christmas Beginning**" (Ballantine, 190 pages, \$17.95), the fifth of this author's annual late-Victorian seasonal mysteries.

Senior-superintendent Runcorn, of the London Metropolitan Police, has taken holiday-leave on the island, where he discovers the body of a young woman, slain in a church graveyard. The taciturn Runcorn, a man without family or position or social graces, agrees to assist the local police in the investigation: "Dealing with violence and fear was the one thing he was good at. It was where his skills were truly valued."


The superintendent's gifts are tested to the hilt in this isolated place, where "there was no excitement in the air, no shouts of 'Merry Christmas,' or sounds of laughter. Even the smell of Christmas was blown away in the wind." But the encouragement of a sympathetic woman spurs Runcorn toward an unexpected confluence of blessings: a possible solution not only to the crime -- which turns on a too-proud person's jealous rage over past events -- but to the dilemma of his

own half-hearted, over-cautious, unfulfilled existence.

The setting is cozier but no less portentous in Louise Penny's "**A Fatal Grace**" (St. Martin's Minotaur, 314 pages, \$23.95), a compelling novel that takes place mostly in the rural Canadian village of Three Pines, about a 90-minute drive from Montreal.

Most of the residents are eccentric but likable -- except for one manipulative, New Age businesswoman whose abrasive ways upset all with whom she comes in contact. There's no shortage of potential culprits when this problematic person -- sitting on an icy lake in an ominously metal chair -- is electrocuted while watching a Christmastime curling match.

More Than Murder**DOW JONES REPRINTS**

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Enter Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, of the Sûreté du Québec: an engaging figure whose investigations seem as much theological as criminological. This case, Gamache tells his wife, has "become about more than murder. Somehow it's about belief." His wife responds: "Every murder you've been on is about belief. What the murderer believes, what you believe."

What the inspector believes in is a beneficent universe. "My job is to find people who take lives," he explains. "And to do that I have to find out why. And to do that I have to get into their headsBut when I come out again, the world is suddenly more beautiful, more alive, more lovely than ever. When you see the worst, you appreciate the best." To solve this crime, it turns out, he must see the worst in multiple forms.

Brian McNulty, the morally ruffled Manhattan bartender-narrator of Con Lehane's boisterous "**Death at the Old Hotel**" (Thomas Dunne, 230 pages, \$24.95), feels a different sort of cosmic equilibrium. "Bartenders develop a great sympathy for suffering humanity and faith in our fellow man," he says, "but we still want to cut the cards."

While "working the stick" during the holidays at a hotel on New York's far West Side, McNulty -- a would-be actor and part-time labor activist -- gets a bar's eye view of how things work in his not-so-noble union local: "The workers get weak contracts that save the boss bundles, so the boss kicks back some of the money to the business agent. The boss saves money, the thugs make money, and the workers get screwed."

When he and his co-workers protest this status quo, McNulty finds himself heading a wildcat strike. Bad enough trying to keep solidarity at Christmastime ("You can't explain a strike to kids waiting for presents"); once the workers' mean-tempered bar manager is found murdered, the police have a whole picket line of suspects. The semi-hapless but always game McNulty maneuvers, negotiates and bluffs his way through gritty encounters with cops, crooks, true believers and fair-weather friends in the hope (not misplaced) of sorting things out in time for the New Year.

McNulty may not always know what he's doing, but, with his expansive nature, he has no problem relating to other people. Erlendur Sveinsson, the Icelandic police-inspector at the center of Arnaldur Indridason's mesmerizing "**Voices**" (Thomas Dunne, 313 pages, \$23.95), is a different kettle of herring: a moody, introspective loner. "Christmas meant nothing to him," we learn. Just the man, perhaps, to head an investigation into the killing of Santa Claus: a Reykjavik hotel- doorman found dead in a Santa suit in a basement room.

There is much more to this Santa's story, it turns out, than any of his co-workers knew -- just as there are tragic reasons for Erlender's gloomy disposition. Those reasons emerge, in due course, in Indridason's enthralling narrative. (The book is translated from the Icelandic by Bernard Scudder.) And Erlendur, with his profound knowledge of human sorrow, proves a worthy spokesman for the life-force whose snuffing out he spends his days and years investigating. "Come to terms with...life," he counsels his bitter grown daughter. "Put up with the suffering it involves. Put up with the suffering we all have to endure...and find and enjoy the happiness...that [life] brings us as well, in spite of our being alive."

Surprise Stuffing

One of the first and best Christmas mystery short stories was Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Blue Carbuncle," in which Sherlock Holmes finds a surprise stuffing in a Christmas goose. It is included in "**Christmas Stories**" (Everyman's Library, 395 pages, \$15), a fine hardbound anthology edited by Diana Secker Tesdell. Several of the 20 tales here will be of special interest to mystery readers: Willa Cather's surprising "The Burglar's Christmas"; Damon Runyon's droll "Dancing Dan's Christmas"; and O. Henry's parcel of sagebrush suspense, "A Chapparral Christmas Gift."



David Bamunda/WSJ

Dashiell Hammett aficionados will be grateful for George J. "Rhino" Thompson's erudite "**Hammett's Moral Vision**" (Vince Emery Productions, 246 pages, \$24.95), a work that offers fresh insights into this author's five classic novels, including "The Glass Key" and "The Maltese Falcon." In Mr. Thompson's view, Hammett's oeuvre displays a psychological and aesthetic arc over the course of his career, tracing a "progression of man's potential to deal morally and ethically with decadent worlds."

BEST-SELLING BOOKS

See an [interactive chart](#)¹ showing the Wall Street Journal's list of best-selling books.

The life of one of Hammett's most famous hard-boiled successors is examined anew by Judith Freeman in "**The Long Embrace**" (Pantheon, 353 pages, \$25.95), a fascinating biographical study that finds the center of Chandler's emotional world in his 30-year marriage to a woman 18 years his senior. "It was the domicile -- the sanctuary he shared with [his wife] Cissy and from which the world at large was excluded -- that largely formed his views and helped mold the personality of the character he was famous for creating, the private eye Philip Marlowe," Ms. Freeman writes. "Cissy was the muse who would inform the central myth of his fiction -- that of the white knight whose task it was to rescue those in peril."

Chandler and Hammett are both represented, along with dozens of their contemporaries, in "**The Black Lizard Big Book of Pulps**" (Vintage Crime, 1,150 pages, \$25), a mammoth trade-paperback anthology, edited by Otto Penzler, of crime-tales from the 1920s, '30s and '40s, replete with period illustrations: a hard-boiled connoisseur's holiday banquet. Among the choice items here are pulp-legend Paul Cain's "One. Two. Three," Chandler's "Red Wind" and a never-before-printed Hammett manuscript, "Faith" -- something especially welcome in this season.

Mr. Nolan is editor of "The Archer Files: The Complete Short Stories of Lew Archer, Private Investigator," by Ross Macdonald (Crippen & Landru).

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