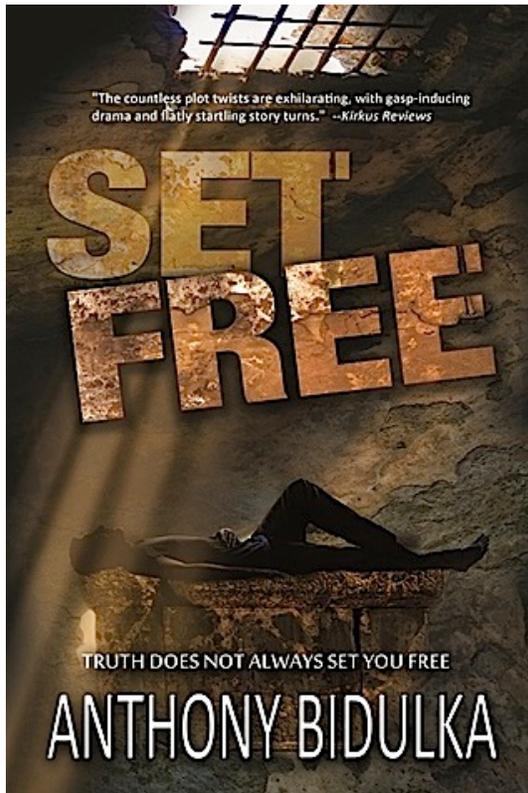


Best Crime Fiction of 2016

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

It's been a rewarding year for reviewers. Many outstanding books competed for the accolade Year's Best, and here is my shortlist of some of the best, as always in alphabetical order. Pick any one and you will not be disappointed. Better yet, read them all!



Anthony Bidulka, *Set Free*

When renowned author Jasper Wills is abducted within minutes of arriving at Menara airport outside the city of Marrakech, he soon finds himself pistol-whipped into unconsciousness. He awakens to discover that he's

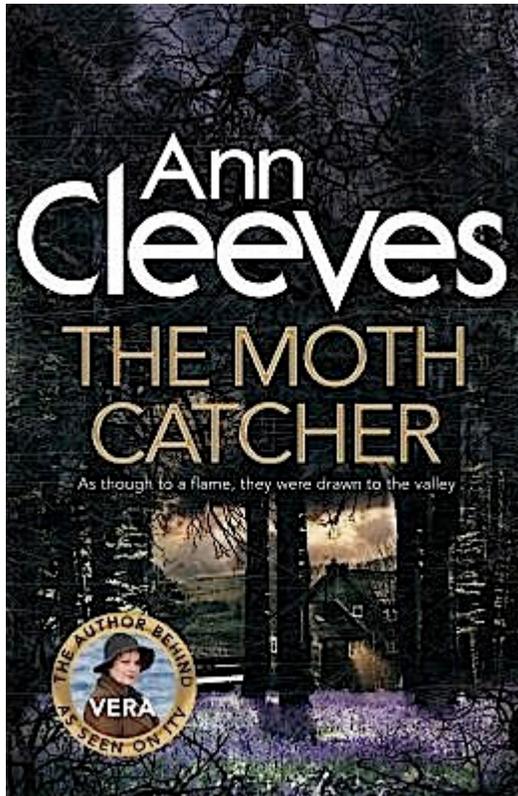
bound and gagged and alone in a darkened room.

As he lies in the isolated room contemplating his fate Jasper tries to make sense of his own abduction. Who took him, and why? Was it connected to his daughter's kidnapping years earlier? Where was he? Just as he begins to puzzle out his location he is moved, his new prison some distance away in the Atlas Mountains.

The weeks pass and Wills is visited by a mysterious woman who speaks no English. His deprivations are replaced by delicacies, honey, a small *tagine* consisting of lamb, apricot and vegetables, even a tiny serving of couscous — all unbelievable luxuries that defy any sort of rational understanding: why starve him to the point of extinction, then reward him with such delights? What is their purpose? The scene is surreal, and before it is ended readers will be taken on a Byzantine journey that will test their own assumptions, their own take on the world. But more — much more — is to come.

Poignant, ingeniously plotted, and exquisitely told, *Set Free* will keep you on the edge of your seat until you turn the final page. Bidulka is an accomplished writer, with nearly a dozen well-received novels to his

credit; but *Set Free* is heads and shoulders above the rest. At the risk of jinxing this talented writer, his latest work could very well be his breakout novel. Pass on it at your own risk.



Ann Cleeves, *The Moth Catcher*

In rural Northumberland, following a visit to a local pub, an elderly man discovers the body of a young man lying in a ditch near the roadside. He phones the police and DCI Vera Stanhope, who was nearby, responds to the call, and the crime scene technicians are quick to follow. The victim's wallet reveals him to be Patrick Randle, who'd been hired to look after a nearby manor house while its owners were away in Australia. He had been bludgeoned to death.

When Vera visits the manor house the case takes on new significance: she

discovers yet another body, this time in Randle's attic flat. A middle-aged man has been stabbed.

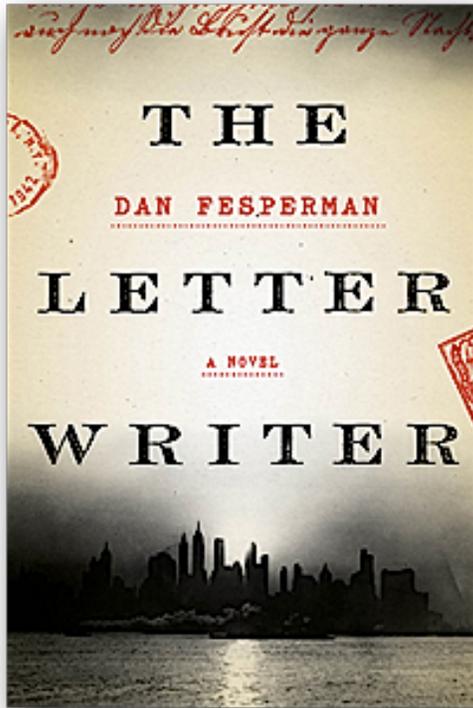
So far the tale seems straightforward enough; but it takes on new depth when Vera and her team look into the two victims' backgrounds. Randle's past seems to have been without blemish: a graduate student in ecology, he led an ordinary life. The victim found murdered in his flat, however, poses questions. Martin Benton was a middle-aged man who had worked as a teacher until suffering from depression, he quit his job and began working for a local charity dealing with recently-released ex-offenders. He had no obvious connection with Randle — until the police learn that both men had a consuming interest in moths! How could this arcane fact possibly explain their deaths?

Cleeves has a keen ear for rural dialogue, and a real gift for providing layered portraits of each of her characters, sharply delineated yet nicely nuanced, and she skillfully exploits these talents in painting a vivid picture of country life. Dominating the whole is a clever plot with unexpected twists and masterful misdirection that will keep readers engaged until the final page. All in all, an excellent read.

Dan Fesperman, *The Letter Writer*

New York City, February, 1942: Woodrow Cain, a police detective from North Carolina, arrives with a checkered past, his wife gone, his daughter left in the care of his sister, and rumors surrounding his

involvement in two deaths back home, one of them his best friend. But four months after Pearl Harbor experienced officers are in short supply, and he is hired as a detective by the NYPD.

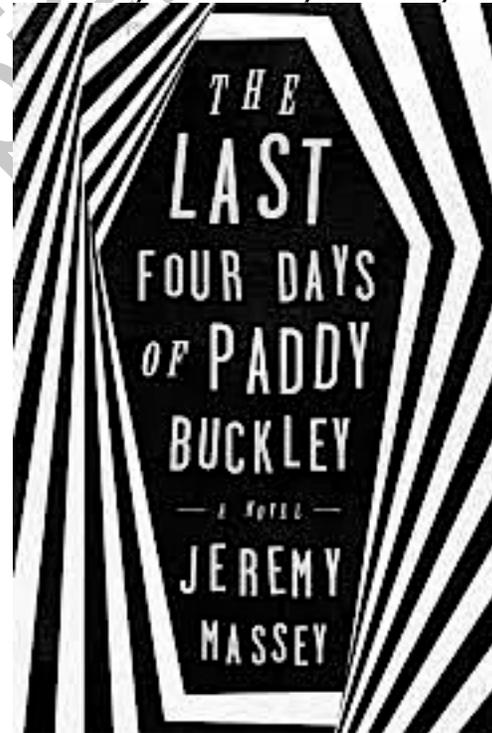


Before long Cain makes the acquaintance of an elderly immigrant named Danzinger. The man is clearly educated, and speaks several languages. He has carved out a reputation in the Lower East Side as a letter writer – someone who can help other immigrants who are illiterate or who have limited language skills to read, and write, to their loved ones abroad. More importantly for Cain, he can also help identify the body of a man found floating in the Hudson River. But Danzinger's own past is yet to be revealed, and Cain soon finds himself caught up in events that go far

beyond a local crime, and involve the rich and powerful.

For more than a decade journalist and novelist Dan Fesperman has been entertaining readers with finely crafted literary tales with a criminal slant. His strength lies in basing his stories on historical events and figures, and weaving an engrossing tale around them. The characters are well drawn and compelling, and the plot holds readers in its grip until the final pages. *The Letter Writer* is a fine crime novel, and more than that, a literary highlight of 2016.

Jeremy Massey, *The Last Four Days of Paddy Buckley*



Paddy Buckley is an undertaker with Gallagher's Funeral Directors, a Dublin firm. Generally he likes his work, but this isn't his week. Things have gone from bad to worse, and Paddy is quickly finding himself up a

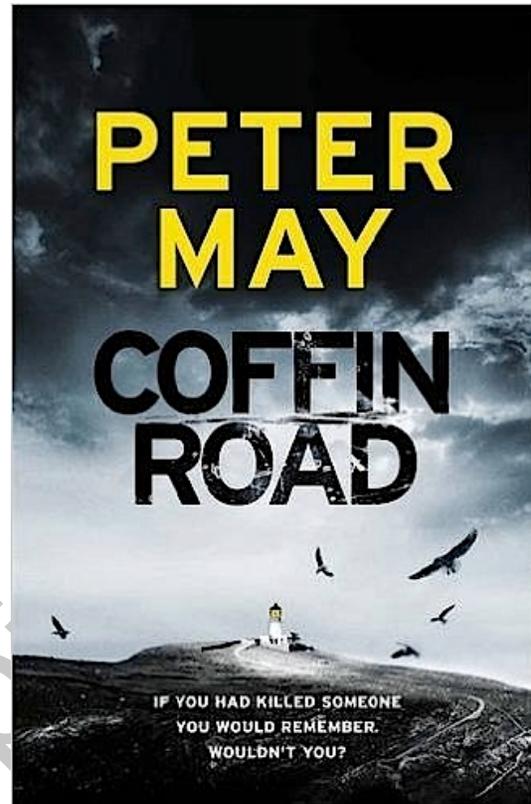
very nasty creek indeed, and lacking the proverbial paddle.

It begins when Paddy receives a late-night call to collect a body from a local nursing home. By the time Paddy has finished the job it's three a.m., and he's driving home in a pouring rain, drowsily mulling over the day's events, when he hits a man walking in the dark. He jumps from his car ready to help, but it's clear the man is dead. Paddy goes through his wallet, trying to determine his identity. His papers reveal him to be one Donal Cullen. Paddy is stunned: he realizes the man is—or was—the brother of Vincent Cullen, Dublin's most notorious gangster. Vincent Cullen is not known for his sense of compassion. The only thing he'll be interested in is who killed his brother, and extracting a terrible revenge. Paddy drops the wallet and stumbles back to his car. He drives off, hoping to escape detection.

The next morning Paddy is in the office, still coming to grips with the events of the previous day, when his boss tells Paddy he has a job for him. It seems Vincent Cullen has called: he wants Gallagher's to handle the funeral. Frank asks Paddy to go to the man's home and make the arrangements. Paddy's nightmare is about to turn a whole lot worse.

The Irish are well known for their dark sense of humor, and on a scale of fifty shades of grey, *The Last Four Days of Paddy Buckley* has to be reckoned among the darkest. Author Jeremy Massey has crafted an original and delightfully wry tale of a hapless but likeable person for whom, it

seems, nothing can go right. Many more twists and turns await the reader of this well-written and quirky debut.



Peter May, *Coffin Road*

When a middle-aged man washes ashore on the Isle of Harris, exhausted and near death, he has no recollection of how he came to be there. Even more remarkably, he does not even know who he is.

His first clue as to his identity comes when an elderly woman encounters him on the rocky beach, and addresses him as Mr. Maclean. She helps him to his cottage nearby, where a dog bounds out to meet him, and he calls to it by name, even though he has no memory of encountering it before now.

The man showers, changes his clothes, serendipitously finds a bottle of single malt, and takes stock of his

surroundings. Some papers on a kitchen table, including a bill addressed to

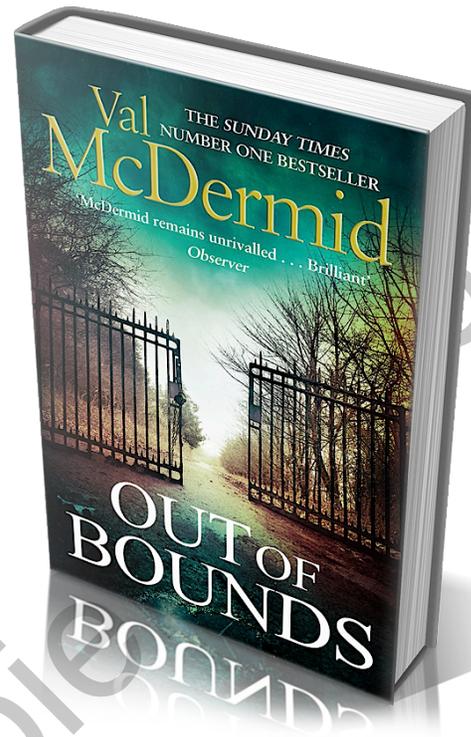
Neil Maclean. Some books on a shelf. Not particularly enlightening. A map on the wall of the Outer Hebrides, which he can see from his cottage window. And curiously, a laptop computer with absolutely nothing on it. Bit by bit the man struggles to reconstruct his world, and learns that there are forces at work that go far beyond the elements of the barren island on which he finds himself.

Peter May's exquisitely-layered novel bridges the gap between Scandinavian Noir and traditional British crime dramas, drawing on the barren landscape of the Scottish Islands for its power, yet fashioning an original narrative that is very much of our time and place. There are uncharted depths here, involving subplots and enigmas galore, to beguile the reader into pressing on. Not least, there is a significant social theme at work, a theme that calls into question mankind's tenuous relationship with nature.

Val McDermid, *Out of Bounds*

When Edinburgh youth Ross Garvie and his mates steal a car and go joyriding, their actions set in motion a train of events that will reach back decades. Garvie winds up in hospital in a coma, but a sample collected by the hospital to determine his blood alcohol level turns up a DNA match involving a rape and murder that occurred over twenty years earlier. At his age Garvie can't be the perp, but someone in his family is. That's enough to interest DCI Karen Pirie,

the head of Police Scotland's Historic Cases Unit.



It's not long before another case lands on her plate. A mentally-challenged man has been found dead on a path bench, seemingly a routine case of suicide. Hardly a cold case, and nothing to concern Pirie, except for one thing: twenty-two years ago Abbot's mother had been murdered, and although her death had been attributed to the IRA, no one had ever been identified as her killer. Two apparently unrelated deaths in the same family? Pirie doesn't believe in coincidences, and she decides to look into the killings.

Still recovering from the death of her personal lover and colleague, killed while working a case only months earlier, Pirie's taken to wandering the largely deserted streets of Edinburgh in the early hours of the morning,

where she encounters a group of Syrian refugees huddled around a campfire. They only seek to make use of the skills they brought from their homeland, but immigration rules prevent them from working until their status is settled. Pirie has enough on her plate already, but their situation concerns her and she seeks a way to help her nocturnal friends.

To succeed Pirie will have to use all her wits. And before it is ended she

will find herself on a dark street utterly alone, stalked by a killer.

Out of Bounds is an original, exquisitely layered, and compellingly told tale, revolving around the most engaging protagonist I've run across in a very long time. It's easily among the top half-dozen crime novels I've read in the past ten years, and McDermid's best yet.

Since 2005 more than 500 of Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, is scheduled to appear in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



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