

## New Collectables

In the wake of our recent feature on 50 Locked-Room Mysteries (see BMC 313), we catch up with two American locked-room aficionados. Translator John Pugmire and the co-publisher of *Mystery Scene* magazine Brian Skupin, answer questions set by Jonathan Scott.

G.M. MALLIET BOOK COLLECTING RUPERT HOLMES

# Mystery Scene

YOUR GUIDE TO THE BEST IN MYSTERY, CRIME & SUSPENSE

## DIVING into DANGER

### Randy Wayne White

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Talks Detective Fiction

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## The Locked-Room Scene

Who would you say is the most important locked-room author currently writing today?

**John:** In western literature: without question Paul Halter, for the number and quality of his puzzles. He has written 37 novels and it is a tribute to his ingenuity that he still keeps coming up with fresh ideas that even John Dickson Carr didn't think of. P. C. Doherty (aka Paul Harding and at least four other *noms-de plume*) may be even more prolific,

but for me his books lack what Brian calls the 'Aha!' moment, when a truly satisfying solution is revealed. Paul Halter's work has that in spades. Bill Pronzini has written some very good locked-room novels but not enough to rank as 'important.'

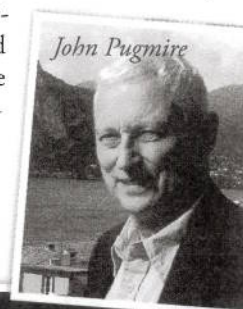
In eastern literature, Shimada Soji, not only for the volume of output and its originality, but also for his influence on a generation of writers.

**Brian:** Paul Halter is the only writer seriously focusing on the locked-room today. There are other writers from whom we can hope to get some good stories, such as Christopher Fowler, David Renwick (the writer of the *Jonathan Creek* TV series), and Bill Pronzini.

John, you are an expert in Japanese and French locked-room authors. Could you tell me a little about the history of the genre in these countries?

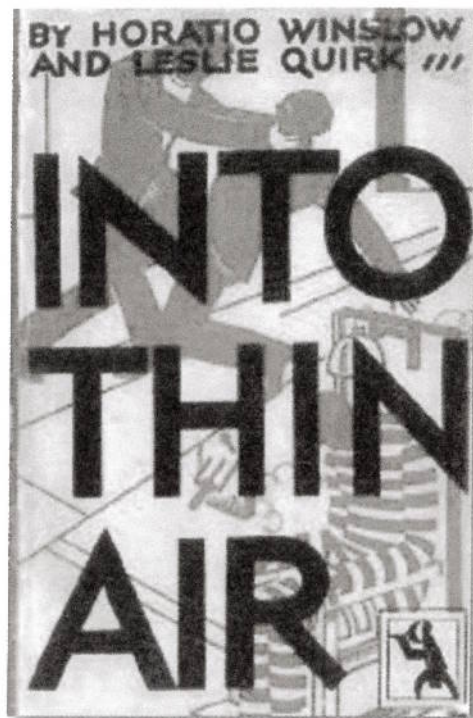
**John:** Once Edgar Allan Poe set the ball rolling, it was the French that made the early running: even before Gaston Leroux there was Henri Cauvin who anticipated Zangwill by six years

and whose detective anticipated Sherlock Holmes by ten. Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin was a very popular contemporary of G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, and during the Golden Age France and French-speaking Belgium supplied a number of excellent writers and several classics. Pierre Boileau, Thomas Narcejac, Boileau-Narcejac as a team, Stanislas-André Steeman, and Noel Vindry all wrote bestselling locked-room novels (there are very few French locked-room short stories) as did Gaston



Brian Skupin and co-publisher of *Mystery Scene*, Kate Stine, at the 2009 Malice Domestic Mystery convention in Washington DC, where they scooped the Agatha Award for contributions to the mystery genre.





Boca and Marcel Lanteaume. The fly in the ointment was the Belgian writer Georges Simenon, the father of the police procedural, who waged a one-man war against what are now called “cozies.” As in the US and the UK, the locked-room novel faded in the 60s and 70s; however, in France it was revived in the early 80s with the arrival of Paul Halter.

Historically, Japan was slow off the mark with locked-rooms, for the simple reason that most Japanese buildings at the time of the western Golden Age had slides and screens instead of lockable doors. By necessity, there was a concentration on “no-footprints” impossible crimes. Edo-gawa Ranpo (a pseudonym based on the phonetic pronunciation of Edgar Allan Poe) was the first notable Japanese writer in the genre in 1925. In the 1940s Yokomizo Seishi wrote what the critics described as the first truly Japanese locked-room because it took place in a traditional Japanese slide-

and-screen house surrounded by snow. The detective in this best-selling novel was Inspector Kindaichi.

Just as elsewhere, there was sporadic activity in the 60s and 70s. Then, in 1981, Soji Shimada's masterpiece *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* was published, and a few years later a “new orthodox school” (*shin honkaku hai*) sprung up which advocated restoration of the classic rules of detective fiction. One of its members, Ayatsuji Yukito, explained, in the words of a character in *Murder in the Ten-Angled Pavilion* (1987): “To me, detective fiction is a kind of intellectual game: a logical game that avoids readers' emotional feelings about detectives or authors. So I'm not interested in the once popular ‘social school’ realism. Female employee murdered in a deluxe hotel suite; criminal police's tireless investigation eventually brings in the murdering boss-cum-boyfriend - all cliché. Political scandals of corruption and ineptness; tragedies of distortion of modern society; these are also out of date... The point is to enjoy the pleasure in the world of reasoning. But intellectual prerequisites must be completely met.” (One could argue that western detective fiction is still dominated by the “social school.”)

Although very few Japanese impossible crime stories have been translated in to English, *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* has: it contains a rather mediocre locked-room puzzle but its plot centres around one of the most diabolically clever red herrings in the history of detective fiction. Incidentally, there have been at least four “locked-room lectures” in Japanese detective fiction; Nikaido Reito, who currently wears Carr's mantle in Japan, has even included a “no footprints lecture” in one of his novels.

I think the main reason a genre remains strong is that there are first-rate writers who love it and believe in it. Their enthusiasm begets new adherents and the movement feeds on itself.

That is certainly the case in Japan, but there is also another factor: there are several *mangas* (stylised graphic novels) aimed at young adults that feature exclusively locked-room mysteries, so there is a generation of new readers being created.

**Who are the most exciting contemporary proponents of locked-room fiction?**

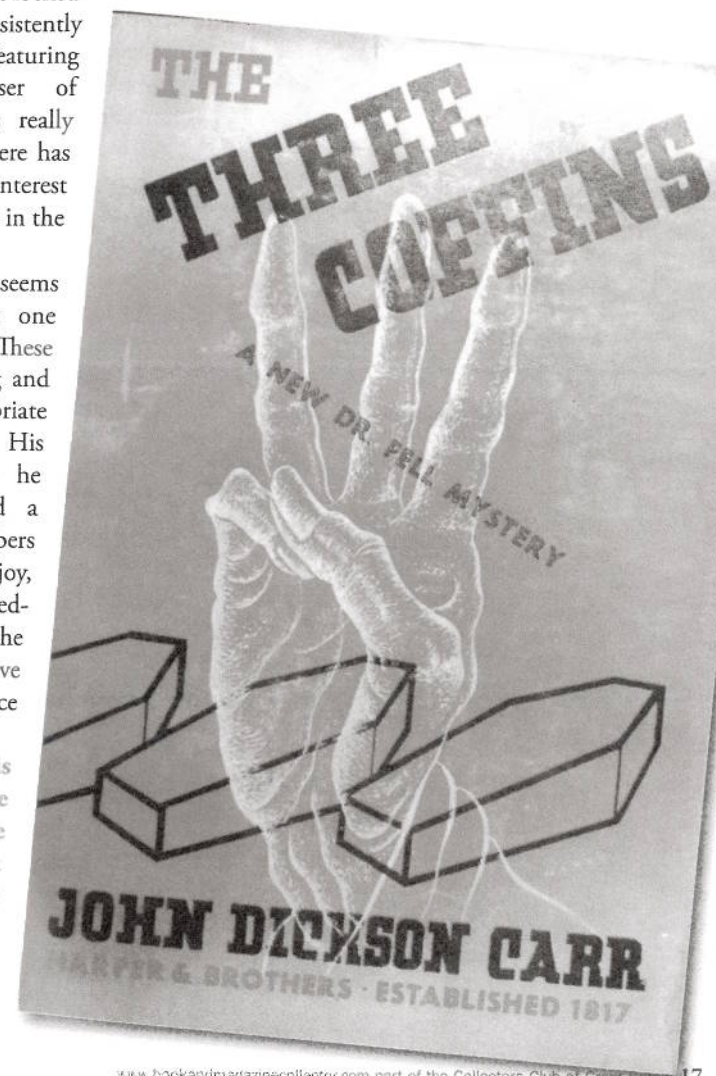
**John:** Aside from Halter and Shimada above, I would have to say David Renwick, the creator of the *Jonathan Creek* TV series, who has introduced millions to the locked-room genre with his consistently ingenious puzzle plots featuring the eponymous deviser of magical illusions. It is really surprising to me that there has been no resurgence of interest in locked-room literature in the UK as a consequence.

**Brian:** David Renwick seems to be writing at least one special every year or so. These are invariably interesting and atmospherically appropriate impossible crimes. His cluing is superb, and he has successfully created a package that the members of the general public enjoy, whether they are locked-room fans or not. He is the only mystery writer to have successfully done that since G.K. Chesterton.

**Paul Halter sets his novels/stories in the past, recreating the atmosphere of the classic mystery story. Why is this?**

**Brian:** Paul Halter in particular is writing in homage to the classic

mysteries of Carr and others that he has enjoyed reading, so it is natural for him to imitate that aspect of those books. For other writers it is partially a matter of atmosphere and partially a matter of forensics. Too many mysteries can be solved forensically. For the mystery to require old-style ratiocination, new science has to be removed from the picture. Of course this may be a comment on the ability of the writer as opposed to being a necessary component of the form.





**John:** For the same reason he sets all of his series detective novels in England (he has two protagonists: the criminologist Dr Twist and the Edwardian aesthete Owen Burns): he happened upon Carr's *He Who Whispers* as a teenager and was hooked. He devoured everything he could find in French by the maestro and decided that writing locked-room mysteries was what he wanted to do; like Carr he decided that the English countryside with its Gothic undertones was the perfect setting. He is a devotee of the classical mystery, with its structure and fair play and has gone so far

as to have Dr Twist denounce that school of writing where "we always know the guilty party: it's society." Speaking of the past, several of Paul's non-series novels are set in Ancient Crete, another of his passions.

**Do you feel locked-room problems can still be at the heart of contemporary crime fiction, or is it a form of narrative fundamentally suited to the world of classic detective fiction?**

**John:** John Sanford (*Night Prey*), Lee Child (*Running Blind*), and Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child (*Brimstone*), have all shown it's

possible to insert a decent impossible crime situation into a contemporary thriller, but there's no contemporary market for locked-room mysteries *per se* in the US. Maybe there would be if the publicity had highlighted the locked-room aspect of these and other books, but publishers seem to regard locked-room as *passé*.

**Brian:** There is not now, and never has been, a reason why locked-room problems, or in fact any type of classic Golden Age puzzle, could not be at the heart of a contemporary novel. Whenever a new art form becomes suddenly popular, most of the early practitioners are unskilled. In the 1920s the publishers of mystery fiction found themselves with a demand to fill, and they filled it as expediently as possible. Writers found themselves required to write a new kind of mystery, and to keep food on the table they had to write one or two new ones each year. Naturally most of those conscripted were bad at the job. In the same way, most disco songs of the early 70s, most graphic novels of the 80s, and most television shows of

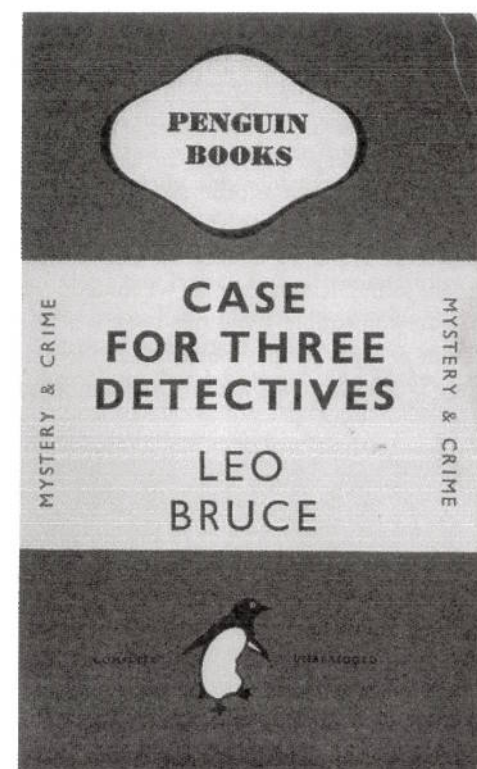
the 40s were poorly written and executed. But there is nothing inherently wrong with these basic forms of art, and no reason that a good disco song popular with the public could not be written today. In fact many are, they simply are no longer referred to as disco.

As mentioned above, David Renwick of *Jonathan Creek* has shown that contemporary stories can have a locked-room mystery at their heart. So why does the rumour persist that it can't be done? Simply because it is harder to do. Writers who only want to write a good novel have enough trouble on their hands – it's something that is tremendously hard to do. If you add in the requirement that there be a good locked-room problem too, then you naturally increase the difficulty.

At the same time, there are and always have been excellent and entertaining mysteries without locked-rooms in them. When the new wave of psychological writers first started to become popular, the influential critic and writer Julian Symons, and others like him, may have found it in their best interests to declare the classic mystery out of fashion, thereby increasing demand for their own product. But the fact is any type of mystery can be a success now. That's always been true and always will be. Writers just need to write good stories.

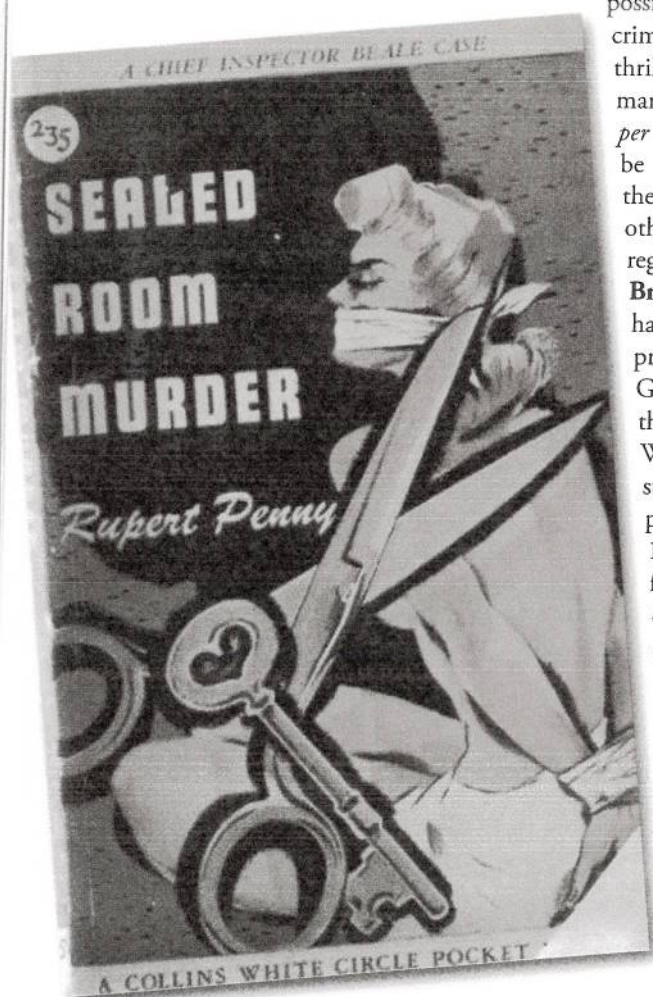
**John, could you talk a little about your efforts to get more Paul Halter work published in English? What is it about Paul's work that inspires you to do this?**

**John:** Quite simply, I love the genre. Just as epic tales appeal to the spirit and romantic tales appeal to the heart, so impossible crime tales appeal to the intellect. Paul's work is first and foremost an intellectual challenge. It was a pleasant surprise to me that, with a small independent publisher best known for science-fiction and no publicity whatsoever, *The Night of the Wolf* sold out its print run and garnered terrific reviews from some of the



most notable critics. But all my efforts to find a publisher for his novels have failed. It's a Catch 22 situation: contemporary mainstream publishers don't care for his classical style, and niche publishers of classical literature won't touch a contemporary author. Paul's problem, if I may put it this way, is that he is still alive. What would you say is the greatest single work of locked-room fiction to come out in the last decade?

**John:** I can only speak to the ones I have read, which means those written in English or French (I can't read Japanese; I rely on summaries from my Chinese friends like Wu Fei who introduced Paul Halter to the Chinese market). When I read *L'Enigme de Monte Verita* (*The Mountain of Truth*, 2007) by Jean-Paul Török, I liked it so much that I immediately set out to translate it. It is





the best truly locked-room novel that I have read in the last ten years, Paul Halter's *La Ruelle Fantome* (*The Phantom Passage*) and *La Chambre d'Horus* (*The Chamber of Horus*) notwithstanding. Török has an elegant and erudite writing style as befits an author whose works have been honoured by the Académie Française. He is an intellectual and also an ardent John Dickson Carr fan – I contend the two are compatible – and this book is a true labour of love. The plot borrows from several Carr/Dickson novels, and a Carr-like figure

solves the mystery, but the central locked-room set up is original and is a beauty. (And, yes, I'm still looking for a publisher.)

**Brian:** It's great fun with a completely unexpected killer.

**Is there an author new to the scene who is creating a buzz among aficionados?**

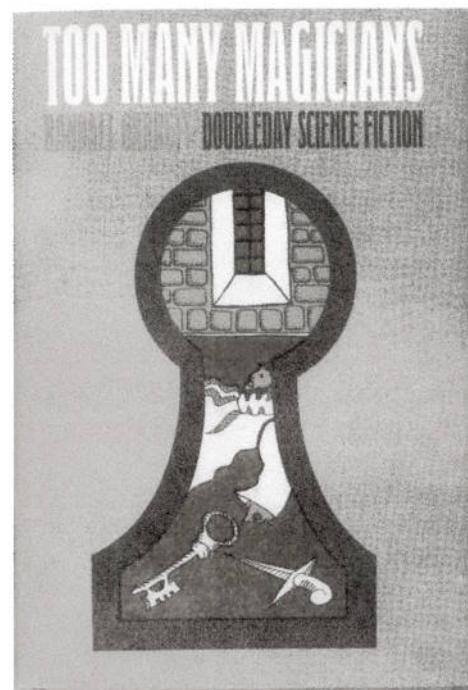
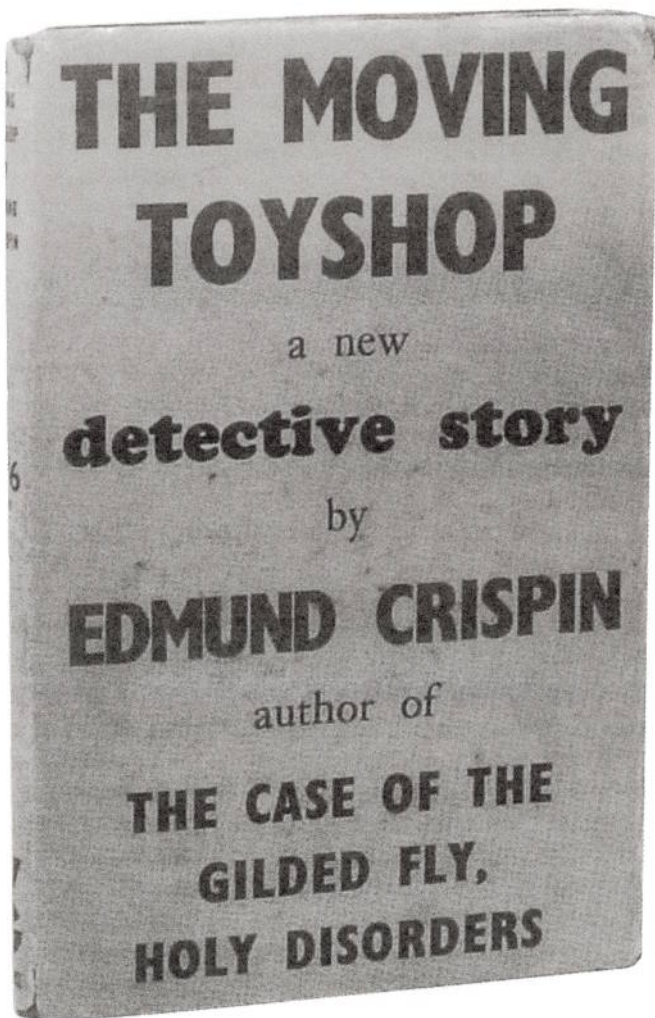
**John:** Christopher Fowler's Bryant & May series, featuring a pair of geriatric detectives, is garnering attention. The author uses the term 'impossible crime' to describe his books, but I didn't think the first few really qualified. He

came close with *Ten-Second Staircase* but really scored with *White Corridor* which contains a totally original – and hilarious – impossible murder situation. His books are all written with great wit, combined with fascinating lore about the history of London.

Hal White's *The Mysteries of Reverend Dean* is a collection of short stories that got some fine reviews. But there would need to be further output beyond this promising start before one could really talk about a buzz.

**Which Japanese authors, published in English, would you recommend to fans of locked-room mysteries?**

**John:** As far as I know, there have only been two Japanese locked-room mysteries published in English: Shimada Soji's *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* and Takagi Akimitsu's *The Tattoo Murder Case*. They are both diabolically ingenious and well worth the read. Be warned, however, that Japanese



mysteries are not for the squeamish or faint of heart: decapitation and dismemberment are standard fare, and the murderers' motives can be extraordinarily callous. You can think of them as Extreme Locked-Rooms.

One way to get the flavour of the Japanese style of impossible crime is to read the *mangas*, those stylised graphic novels where the protagonists perpetually wear startled expressions and perspire profusely. They are primarily aimed at the young adult audience. Seventeen of the 'Kindaichi Case Files' *mangas*, dedicated exclusively to locked-room mysteries, have been published in English and – once you get beyond the stylisation – offer some of the best crafted and most fairly clued stories in print today. It is said that each book is based on one or more well-known Japanese locked-room novels; certainly #2, *The Mummy's Curse*, is based on *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders* and #16 *The Magical Express* is based on another

Shimada story. There are other locked-room *mangas* such as *Detective Academy Q* and *Case Closed* but they are shorter in length (most Kindaichi are around 240 pages long) and hence do not permit the desired plot build-up. Incidentally, the adolescent detective in the series carries the name Kindaichi, because he is the grandson of the great detective

**Are there any French locked-room authors, aside from Paul Halter, currently being published in English?**

**John:** None that I know of, and Halter has only had one book: *The Night of the Wolf* – a short story collection – translated so far. Even during the heyday of the genre, there were very few: Boileau's *Le Repos de Bacchus* appeared as *The Sleeping Bacchus* (and not attributed to him), and Boileau-Narcejac's far superior *Ingenieur qui aimait trop les chiffres* appeared as *The Tube*. It is truly a missed opportunity because there are some remarkable books that could bring great pleasure.

**How do you define a locked-room mystery?**

**John:** It obviously must include a seemingly impossible crime, must be fairly clued, and convincingly explained. It's really hard to write a good locked-room mystery, because you can't cheat. You can't have some minor character appear out of nowhere at the end with an obscure motive, because you have to explain *how* the murder was done. And you have to decide what's acceptable: in my view, no self-respecting locked-room should allow secret passages, duplicate keys, lying witnesses, supernatural agents, human flies, midgets, booby-traps or assorted animals.

**Brian:** I define a locked-room mystery as a mystery in which it seems a person must have been inside a room to perform some action, and yet there appears to be no way in which that person could have either entered or exited the room.

The more general description of the impossible



crime is the occurrence of any criminal act that does not appear to have been possible, and could include an impossible disappearance, a murder in sand or snow with no footprints to account for the murderer, or a death apparently caused without any interaction with the victim, such as a poisoning in which case there seems to be no way for the victim to have ingested the poison.

Of course there is really no reason that the impossible occurrence needs to be a crime, and so the term 'miracle problem' was coined by Carr to cover all possibilities. It's the most inclusive description, but is not memorable.

**Could you tell me a little about *Mystery Scene*?**

**Brian:** *Mystery Scene* was originally founded as a sort of insider's magazine about the mystery or crime genre, and included information about contracts and book deals of interest to writers. When Kate Stine and I acquired it in 2002, we changed the focus to fans of mystery, thriller and crime fiction. We publish five issues per year – four seasonal issues plus an end of year Holiday issue – including lively interviews, essays, opinions, and reviews in the genre. *Mystery Scene* is available on newsstands in North America, and we have subscribers throughout Great Britain, Europe, and Asia. [Visit: [www.mysteryscenemag.com](http://www.mysteryscenemag.com).]

**Is there still a strong market for locked-room problems?**

**John:** In Asia it's very strong, with Japan leading the way. The Chinese market is in its infancy but growing. The market in France is reasonably active, probably due to Paul Halter being French, and the tireless efforts of Roland Lacourbe, who has produced 15 anthologies and (with his partner Daniele Grivel) innumerable translations, as well as a first-rate biography and bibliography of Carr. Alas, America is still fixated on the police procedural, preferably set in some exotic milieu, and the "social crime" with a lot of

boutique niches such as cat-loving detectives, park ranger detectives, chef detectives, etc.

**Are there any American publishers specializing in locked-room problems?**

**Brian:** There are not. However Ramble House, Richard Simms publications, and Crippen & Landru are all publishers with a much higher than average percentage of locked-room mysteries in their line-ups. Both Ramble House and Crippen & Landru feature Golden Age mysteries, many of which tend to be locked-rooms, and Richard Simms is focusing on the works of Arthur Porges, a noted locked-room short-story writer.

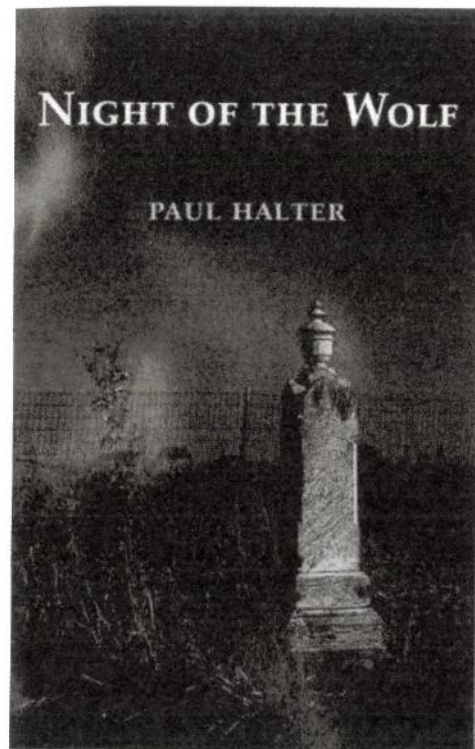
**John:** Crippen & Landru has published its fair share – with collections by Ed Hoch, Joseph Commings, and Christianna Brand, to name but three, and Vincent Cornier due soon.

**Do you see Carr as the pioneering master of all time?**

**John:** Gaston Leroux, G.K. Chesterton, and Thomas Hanshew all preceded Carr. He praised Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* and was an avid reader of both Chesterton and Hanshew – another American living in England – in his youth. For me, Chesterton is Carr's only rival, but I think Carr must take the laurels if only because Chesterton produced no locked-room novels.

**Brian:** He certainly wasn't the pioneer, as others, notably Zangwill and Chesterton, were there ahead of him. But he created many more unique problems and solutions than any other writer. In addition, when he was at his best, such as in *The Unicorn Murders*, *The Judas Window*, or *Nine and Death Make Ten*, he was one of the best mystery novelists period. In addition to brilliant cluing and puzzles, he was able to create truly frightening and suspenseful atmospheres.

**Away from locked-room problems, what's your opinion of contemporary crime fiction? Does the stream of gritty procedurals / forensic investigators leave you cold?**



**John:** I loved the first few Jonathan Kellermans and Patricia Cornwells, as well as Kathy Reichs' early books. John Sanford's Lou Bolt books and Lee Child's Jack Reacher novels have kept up a consistently high standard. Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child have added a tinge of the supernatural to their fine tales. Since there haven't been that many locked-room novels published in English, I've actually had plenty of time to read procedurals and thrillers.

**Brian:** As always there is a lot of terrific crime fiction out there. I read about half and half new and old. Of the new writers, Lee Child is always outstanding. Lisa Lutz is wonderful, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was terrific, Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child are excellent, and the Jasper Fforde novels are seminal. If you're not interested in the forensic or procedural

novels, as I am not, there are plenty of other things to read, but that doesn't make the forensic novels bad—it's a matter of opinion like anything else.

**If you could only choose one locked-room novel, and one short story, to take to your desert island, what would they be?**

**John:** If it could be translated into English first, I would take Nikaido Reito's 4,000 page, four-volume epic: *Castle of Werewolves*, which contains ten impossible crimes and one locked-room lecture. I haven't directly read anything by him, but I've read summaries of his 'locked-room lecture' and his 'no footprints' lecture, and his version of body-on-tennis-court-with-no-footprints, which is far superior in my view to Carr's. And with 10 impossible crimes, what could go wrong?

Surely one would be allowed an anthology or a collection and not just one measly short story? For an anthology I would pick Ellery Queen's *101 Years of Entertainment*, containing 49 mystery shorts including 12 locked-rooms, all written before 1941. As a collection, I'd also like Crippen & Landru's *Diagnosis Impossible*, 12 stories by Ed Hoch, the most prolific writer ever of locked-room mysteries.

**Brian:** Although the best puzzle and explanation we're likely to get to the locked-room mystery is *The Judas Window*, I would still choose Carr's *The Hollow Man*, which has the distinction of an outstanding locked-room mystery, the best-ever footprints in the snow problem, and extended debate and theorizing on the puzzle mystery in general and the locked-room in particular. Also *The 51st Sealed Room* by Robert Arthur is a terrific but little-known story, about a locked-room mystery writer who needs a plot for a locked-room mystery.

**Are either of you working on any projects that you could tell our readers about?**

**John:** Currently, other than trying to get Török and Halter published, I'm researching



the identity of the stories alluded to in Carr's 'Locked-Room Lecture' but not specifically named. I'm also developing a classification method for impossible crimes.

**Brian:** We are also collaborating on *The Complete History of the Locked-Room Mystery*, a reference work devoted to locked-rooms

and impossible crimes. The only other such work, Robert Adey's seminal *Locked-Room Murders*, is mainly a bibliography. Our book will include cornerstones of the genre, Top 10 lists, trivia, essays on key works and authors, and an opinionated review of the best books, TV shows and movies.

#### Who are your favourite authors/books of the Golden Age?

**John:** I think your article identified many of them and the panel I wrote about in 'A Locked-room Library' selected 99 books, most of which were published in that period. If I had to pick a few that were not in your article, they would be:

John Dickson Carr (writing as Carter Dickson): *The Judas Window* and *The Peacock Feather Murders*. David Duncan's *The Shade of Time* is the SF writer's only excursion into impossible crime, full of sparkling philosophical dialogue as well as an original and ingenious murder method.

Derek Smith: 1953 is stretching the Golden Age a bit, but his *Whistle Up the Devil* has two locked-room murders, one of which is a contender for Best of Breed.

Pierre Boileau: *Six crimes sans assassin* (*Six crimes without a killer*), his masterpiece. Impossible murder count: six, only exceeded by Halter's *Sept Merveilles du crime* (*The Seven Wonders of Crime*) with seven. Just as Dannay was the plotter of the Ellery Queen duo, so was Boileau for Boileau-Narcejac. He was known as The Watchmaker for the meticulous precision of his plots.

Christianna Brand: her *Suddenly at His Residence* was listed in the top 50 and is indeed very good. I happen to prefer *Death of Jezebel* for its audaciously brilliant puzzle. By far the wittiest impossible crime writer, her *Tour de Force* will have you in stitches. What a pity she didn't write more.

Noel Vindry: *La maison qui tue*, the best work of the anti-Simenon. A dry-as-a-bone writing style but very inventive with respect to murder methods.

Outside the Golden Age:

Shimada Soji: his seminal *TZM* is a must-read. Do not spoil the pleasure by flipping through the pages.

Peter Lovesey: *Bloodhounds* is a terrific padlocked-barge tale solved by the inimitable Diamond.

Halter: *La Quatrieme Porte*. The book that sparked the French renaissance.

**Brian:**

Carr's *The Three Coffins* (*The Hollow Man* in the UK), *The Unicorn Murders*, *The Judas Window*, *Nine and Death Make Ten*, *The Case of the Constant Suicides*, *The White Priory Murders*, and *The Peacock Feather Murders*.

Stacy Bishop's *Death in the Dark*

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Have His Carcase*

C. Daly King's *The Curious Mr. Tarrant*

Other notables from before or after the Golden Age include:

Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery*

Chesterton's 'The Secret Garden', 'The Oracle of the Dog', and 'The Dagger with Wings'.

Alan Green's *What a Body!*

Christianna Brand's *Death of Jezebel*

David Duncan's *The Shade of Time*

Peter Antony's *The Woman in the Wardrobe*

Derek Smith's *Whistle Up the Devil*

John Sandford's *Night Prey*

John Sladek's *Invisible Green*

Peter Lovesey's *Bloodhounds*

