

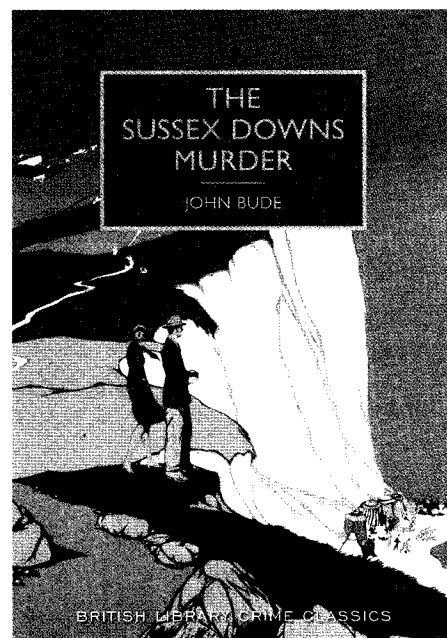
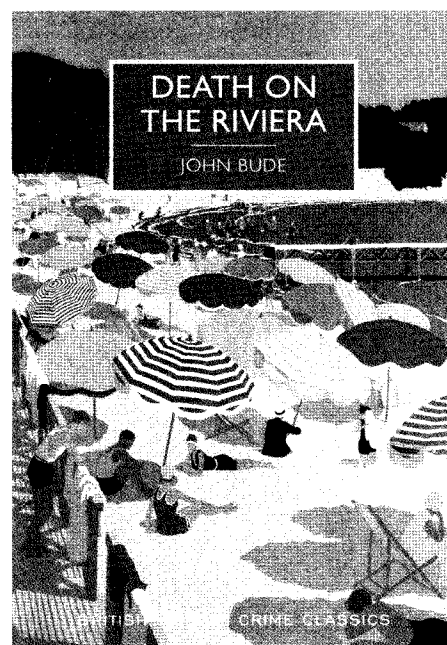
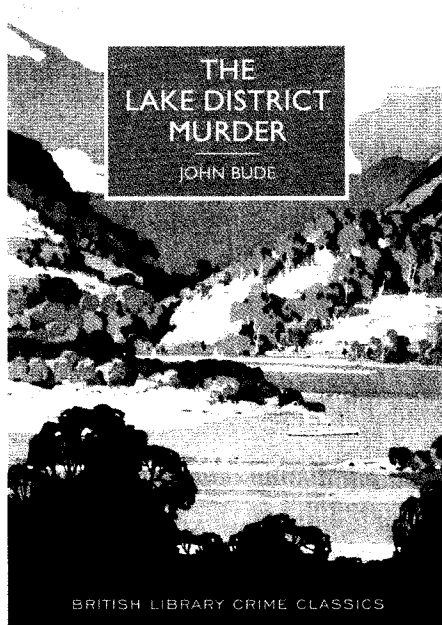
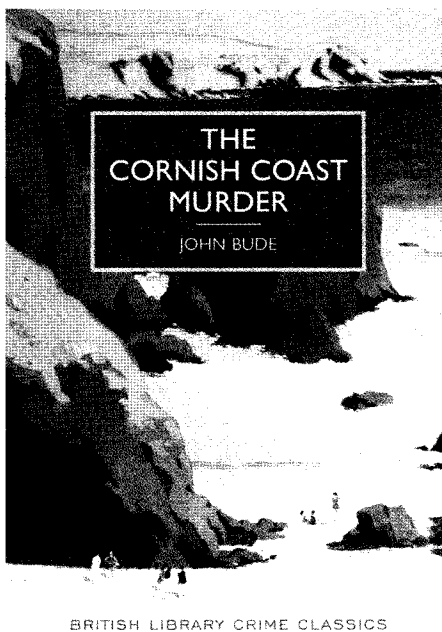
A New Golden Age for Crime Classics?

by Martin Edwards

Something strange is happening in the world of crime fiction. It's suddenly cool to love Golden Age mysteries. Not just to admire the famous names, like Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, but to relish writers whose books have been out of print for three-quarters of a century. This trend began in England, but it's caught on elsewhere—not only in the US, but also in much less likely corners of the world.

The first clue to the scale of this revival came in Britain just before the end of 2014. The British Library's new edition of *Mystery in White*, an obscure novel by J. Jefferson Farjeon, became the number one bestseller at THE major bookshop chain Waterstones, outselling all the competition, including *Gone Girl*. The sales figures sparked press interest, but was this a one-off, a Christmas curiosity?

The answer is a resounding “no.” The first few forgotten books reissued by the British Library as a publishing experiment attracted little attention, but that changed early in 2014, when two books by John Bude appeared in its new series Crime Classics. *The Cornish Coast Murder* and *The Lake District Murder* were Bude's first two novels, dating from the early 1930s, and the print run sold out fast.



So did the second, and then the third. The books were beautifully presented, and the “retro” covers, featuring colorful images taken from old railway posters in the British Library's archives were a big hit. But you can't judge a book by a cover, even if the artwork persuades you to pick it off the shelf. People who had never heard of John Bude (and hardly anyone had!) appreciated his readable puzzles and knack for creating lively characters in well-evoked settings.

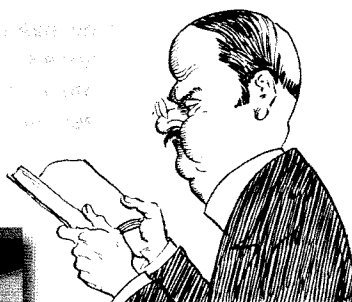
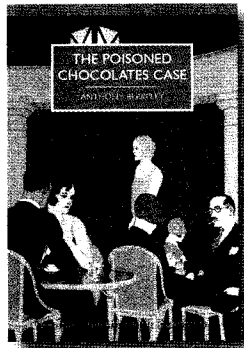
The Crime Classic paperbacks became a word-of-mouth phenomenon. The British Library's publishing department is modest in size, but now has a long list of bestsellers. As series consultant, I'm keen to make sure

that writers of acknowledged high calibre (such as Anthony Berkeley, *aka* Francis Iles, Raymond Postgate, and Anthony Gilbert) are featured, along with some authors who were not well known even during the inter-war years. Last winter's edition of Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, famous for its six solutions, even included a seventh solution written by Christianna Brand (*Green for Danger*) in the 1970s, and a new one—written by me. The publisher has also commissioned a dozen themed collections of Golden Age short stories, which have far outsold all the other anthologies I've edited, even those including stories by Ruth Rendell, P.D. James, and Colin Dexter. *Silent Nights*, a collection

of Christmas mysteries, is one of the biggest-selling crime anthologies published in Britain during the past half-century.

This success has inspired many other publishers to dip into their back catalogues. HarperCollins has republished several books that Christie, Sayers, and their colleagues in the Detection Club produced in the 1930s—notably the collaborative novels *The Floating Admiral* and *Ask a Policeman*. They have also revived their Detective Story Club, which predated the more famous Collins Crime Club; the new editions offer an eclectic mix of vintage writers ranging from Freeman Wills Crofts to Vernon Loder. A smaller publisher, Dean Street Press, has done great work by making available titles by authors such as Basil Thomson, E.R. Punshon, and Winifred Peck in ebook editions; print on demand copies are also available.

The “Golden Age of detective fiction” between the world wars is often regarded as quintessentially British. This is because of the massive and enduring popularity of writers like Christie and Sayers, but authors in other



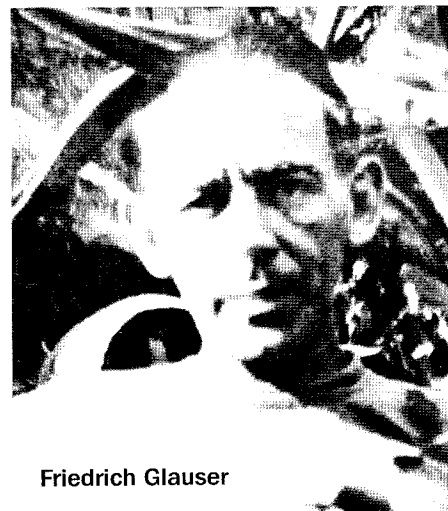
countries produced books in a similar vein. Sadly, hardly any of them other than Georges Simenon, creator of Maigret, are translated into English. Today, the picture is changing fast.

Bitter Lemon Press has published the Sergeant Studer series written by Friedrich Glauser, “the Swiss Simenon.” Much of Glauser’s short and unhappy life was spent in psychiatric wards, asylums, and even prison, but *Thumbprint* (1936), the first of the Studer stories (which was filmed, but never before translated into English) shows why he deserves to be remembered

Pushkin Vertigo has followed suit, reissuing tricky Continental puzzles by France’s Frédéric Dard, Austria’s Leo Perutz, and Italy’s Augusto

De Angelis. From the immediate postwar period, they have also republished *Death Going Down* (1954), by María Angélica Bosco, “the Argentinian Agatha Christie.” The books of another writer compared to Christie, Sweden’s Maria Lang, were recently adapted for television (the subtitled version was called *Crimes of Passion*) and this led Mulholland Books to reissue several of her novels.

Locked Room International (LRI), an independent press whose name speaks for

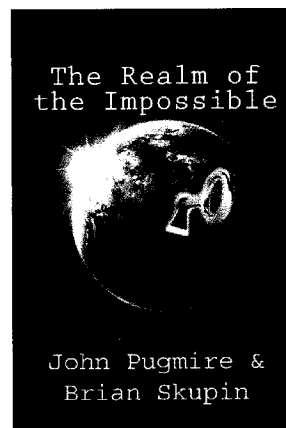


Friedrich Glauser

An Anthology by John Pugmire & Brian Skupin

A groundbreaking anthology of 26 impossible crime stories from over 20 countries demonstrating the global appeal of this most fiendishly ingenious tale. Several stories appear here for the first time—many have never been anthologized—and a few hard-to-find classics are here, as well.

Also included are 12 short anecdotes of real-life impossibilities.



“A landmark anthology which establishes that the crafting of brilliant short impossible crime fiction is not an exclusively Anglo-American endeavor.”

—Publishers Weekly, starred review

“The range of authors collected in this surprising and welcome volume, and the diversity of their backgrounds, is a tribute to the detective skills of the editors... It is...well...impossible to applaud loudly enough.”

—Otto Penzler, in the Foreword to *The Realm of the Impossible*

THE REALM OF THE IMPOSSIBLE
John Pugmire, Brian Skupin, eds.
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Stacey Bishop

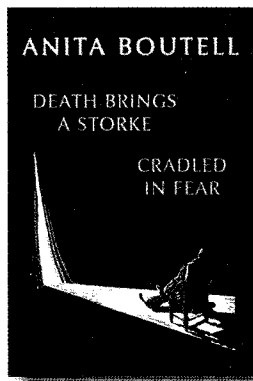
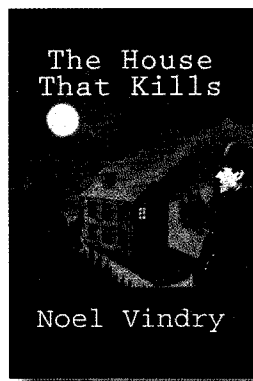


C. Daly King

itself, has revived interest in France's answer to John Dickson Carr. Noel Vindry was popular in his heyday, but the lack of English translation meant that his fame did not spread. The same was true of another LRI author, Pierre Véry, who showed particular flair for the short story. Japanese readers and writers have long enthused over Golden Age fiction, and LRI has also published sealed room classics by Soji Shimada, Yokito Ayat-suji, and Alice Arisugawa.

What about American mystery writers of the Golden Age? The brilliance of hardboiled superstars like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler has overshadowed the work of compatriots who specialized in classic Golden Age whodunits. While Ellery Queen and John Dickson Carr are still well remembered, names like C. Daly King, Rufus King, and Stacey Bishop have long been forgotten.

Rue Morgue Press did splendid work some years ago in reviving forgotten authors such as Clyde B. Clason, while Coachwhip Publications has reissued books by the likes of Anita Boutell and Kirke Mechem. Crippen & Landru, whose "Lost



Classics" was a pioneering imprint in this field, are still going strong. Recent titles including Frederick Irving Anderson's *The Purple Flame and Other Detective Stories*, a collection gathered by Benjamin F. Fisher, and an expanded version of C. Daly King's *The Curious Mr Tarrant*, the first edition of which is among the rarest Golden Age mystery titles.

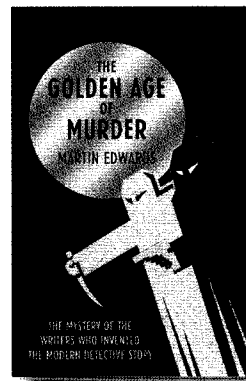
Even scarcer is a first edition of Stacey Bishop's extraordinary *Death in the Dark*, a book which in fine condition would cost a small fortune. Thanks to Locked Room International, a paperback edition is now available for a few dollars. Bishop was the pen name of avant garde composer George Antheil, and the new edition contains a fascinating afterword from an expert on Antheil. This is surely the only crime novel to have benefited from input from three winners of the Nobel Prize!

Background information such as this afterword offers "added value" which many Golden Age fans love. Until recently, little was known about many authors of the period, and readers do enjoy finding out about writers whose books they enjoy—and the times in which they lived. I've been happily surprised by reaction to my study of the Detection Club in the 1930s, *The Golden*

Age of Murder: I wrote it as a labour of love over the span of a decade, unsure if it would even be published, and never dreaming it would become my most successful book in terms of reviews, awards, and sales. My latest book for the British Library, *The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books*, goes further, exploring the genre's development through the first half of the 20th century.

What explains this extraordinary renaissance of Golden Age fiction? Nostalgia plays a part, as does the fact that today, these stories provide pleasurable escapism in uncertain times, just as when they first appeared. But there's more to it than that.

The truth is that traditional mysteries have always been popular with readers. The highly



successful Malice Domestic convention, which celebrates this kind of story, will have its 30th year in 2018. But for too many years, too many critics undervalued Golden Age mysteries. Most of those books were long

out of print, so critics tended to rely on stereotypes and assumptions that fall apart when one actually reads the stories. Yes, there were plenty of poor books—but in what age has that not been true?

Classic crime stories have been patronized for too long. Many of the best—think of Francis Iles' *Malice Aforethought*, or Christie's *And Then There Were None*—are as dark as anything in Scandinoir. Iles' *Before the Fact* has a finale so chilling that Hitchcock had to change (and sabotage) it when he filmed the story. Such books are not merely clever and entertaining, they are gripping and original. It's taken far too long for some critics to catch up with the sound instincts of readers. But now that so much Golden Age fiction is available again, there's no excuse for underestimating it. The power of a good story, well told, is irresistible—and enduring. And that's true whether the author is Dashiell Hammett, Stieg Larsson, or Anthony Berkeley. ✦

Martin Edwards is the author of 18 novels, most recently The Dungeon House. His latest book, The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books, follows the multi-award winning The Golden Age of Murder. He is President of the Detection Club and Chair of the Crime Writers' Association.