

Pomp & Circumstantial Evidence



The official newsletter for Magna cum Murder

June 2012 · Vol. 18, No. 2 · Published Quarterly

Eric G. Wilson Magna Banquet Keynoter

By Joseph Bender

This year we are pleased to welcome Dr. Eric G. Wilson, a lifelong student of the macabre, as Magna cum Murder's banquet speaker. He is The Thomas H. Pritchard Professor of English at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina where he currently teaches British and American Romanticism, creative nonfiction, and cultural stories.



Can't Look Away, which explores the different dimensions of the macabre and our fascination with it. Dr. Wilson uses ideas that we normally find morbid to spark the reader's imagination about life and vitality, rendering a positive feeling unlike anything most of us have experienced. In the book he makes this point: "We are enamored of ruin. The deeper the darkness is, the more dazzling. Our secret and ecstatic wish: Let it all fall down.... (D)earth's perpetual certitude inspires us to imagine more truthful lives."

I recently had an opportunity to speak at length with Dr. Wilson about his writing and academic careers, including, of course his most recent book *Everyone Loves a Good Train Wreck: Why We*

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Magna cum Murder
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Magna cum Murder

October 26-28, 2012

Guest of Honor — SJ Rozan
Banquet Speaker — Eric G. Wilson

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Writers' Observations on Writing



Good writing is a kind of skating which carries off the performer where he would not go.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Good writing is supposed to evoke sensation in the reader—not the fact that it's raining, but the feel of being rained upon.

—E.L. Doctorow

Good writing is true writing. If a man is making a story up it will be true in proportion to the amount of knowledge of life that he had had and how conscientious he is; so that when he makes something up it is as it would truly be.

—Ernest Hemingway

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When we spoke I asked him if there is anything too gruesome that even he, such a serious student of the macabre, couldn't stand to see or think about. "I simply couldn't watch a beheading," he said, explaining further, "I guess I enjoy aesthetic macabre the most. The literature of Shakespeare and text can have just as much an effect to some degree."

We talked about the visual macabre and gruesomeness made commonplace today by the Internet. He thinks we are so bombarded with visual world images and virtual reality that, by definition, it becomes unreal to us. This, in turn, desensitizes people who've grown up on it. I am 22 years old and agree with him that my generation has a higher threshold for grisly violence—higher certainly than, say, my parents' generation.

From start to finish the many hours I spent thoroughly examining and thinking about the ideas presented in this book (which I came to refer to as simply "Train

Wreck," as does Dr. Wilson) exposed me to a completely new way of thinking. It sent me on a soul search unlike anything I have ever read.

While he was writing *Train Wreck* Wilson talked with Joyce Carol Oates who had some very constructive criticisms with which he struggled. When I asked him how he overcame his initial discouragement, and even included Oates' criticism in the book, he laughed and said,

"He thinks we are so bombarded with visual world images and virtual reality that, by definition, it becomes unreal to us. This, in turn, desensitizes people who've grown up on it."

"It was risky to include this in the book, but I've gotten some very positive feedback on it, so I'm

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Discovery and Rediscovery

By Kathryn Kennison

Nobody reads the same book twice," said Robertson Davies, whose death on December 2, 1995, inspired obituaries in a dozen countries and mourning all around the globe. "The great sin," according to Davies was assuming that a book once read, stayed read. Here's what he says about reading *Vanity Fair*:

"People are expected to read it during their university years. But you are mistaken if you think you read Thackeray's book then; you read a lesser book of your own. It should be read

again when you are thirty-six, which is the age of Thackeray when he wrote it. It should be read for the third time when you are fifty-six, sixty-six, seventy-six, in order to see how Thackeray's irony stands up to your own experience of life. Perhaps you will not read every page in these later years, but you really should take another look at a great book, in order to find out how great it is, or how great it has

remained, to you."

I won't say how old my husband, Dick, is but he's older than Thackeray was when he died (at 52) which puts yet another interesting spin on Davies proposition. We thought the book was extraordinary when we read it together a few years ago, but

Dick (who is currently re-reading *Vanity Fair*) claims it is even better upon a second, more reflective, reading. Since he already knows the outcome he can relax and savor the book as he reads at a more leisurely

pace which allows him to appreciate the brilliance of Thackeray's insight more than upon the first reading.

Recently the High Noon Critical Readers, the reading group sponsored by the E.B. and Bertha C. Ball Center, read *Miss Garnet's Angel* by Salley Vickers, a book I had already read at least twice before. Reading it for a third time, I'm sure I'll read it yet

"The great sin," according to Davies was assuming that a book once read, stayed read.

thinking, wow! Here's this little human being who needs me!"

Other books by Eric Wilson include *The Mercy of Eternity: A Memoir of Depression and Grace* and five books on the relationship between literature and psychology. He lives with his wife Sandi and daughter, Una, in North Carolina. He is a second degree black-belt in Tae Kwon

Do, and a tri-athlete. Eric is a fan of Hollywood movies from the 30s and 40s who has written a brilliant about Cary Grant, "The Prince of Denmark, *In Bright Lights Film Journal*. ☺

(Joey Bender is *Magna cum Murder's* newest intern. He is a junior at Ball State majoring in Advertising.)

Don't miss this fascinating keynote presentation! Hear Eric G. Wilson at this year's Magna cum Murder!

"Eric G. Wilson's smart, probing new book . . . sets out to explain what lies beneath our collective fascination with death and suffering . . . *Everyone Loves a Good Train Wreck* isn't some holier-than-thou polemic out to cure us of our dark leanings . . . Instead, it simply aims to help readers gain 'a fulfilling response to two of life's greatest, most pressing and persistent questions. What is the meaning of suffering? What is the significance of death? . . . The book's slim, peripatetic chapters cover an awful lot of erudite territory, as Wilson draws ideas and research from a delightful grab bag of academics, artists and thinkers. Aristotle, Freud, Kant, Goya and Hardy all make appearances, alongside an assortment of sociopaths and serial murderers." —John Wilwol, *NPR.org*

"A leisurely, light-footed overview of our cultural obsession with doom, gloom, and gore." —Josh Rothman, *The Boston Globe*

"Compelling . . . Wilson keeps hearing a voice within that tells him to 'look.' He follows this instinct, energized by the idea that his thoughtful connoisseurship of the world's darkness is good--noble, even. Wilson draws on philosophers, poets, psychologists, filmmakers and more to build a case that 'an eager, open-minded interest in the macabre' provides 'a special invitation to think about life's meanings' . . . Wilson's guidance is personal, engaging, and convincing . . . The book offers heaps of terribly tantalizing topics." —Chris Jozefowicz, *Rue Morgue*

glad I did.” I, personally, thought the timeliness of this chapter made the book more complete by offering the views of a critic of the book who just happens to be one of the country’s most critically acclaimed writers. Whatever seemingly negative ideas one might have about it, it really does “give the book clarity in the end,” as Wilson explains.

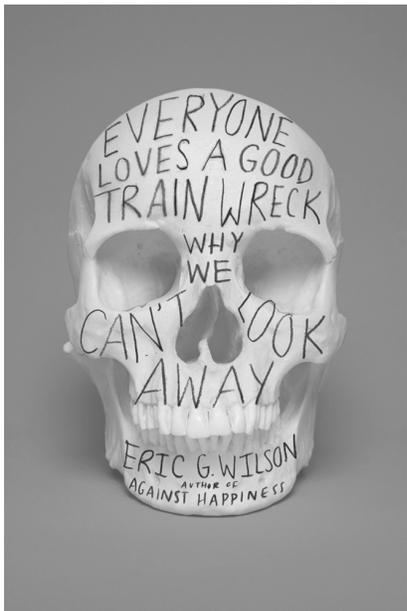
“In my earlier book, *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy* I was confident in what I was writing. In *Train Wreck* I was more exploratory...

at times I thought, wow, I shouldn’t even be writing this!”

I asked him about his openness about his own depression and bipolar disorder in his books. It’s impressive how well he embraces it. Wilson says he thinks it has helped him, and enhanced his philosophical perspective in ways most people don’t immediately understand. He’s learned to transform depression and bipolar disorder into something positive and useful in his every-

day life.

The elegiac tone of his 2008 book, *Against Happiness*, is similar to *Train Wreck*. I was particularly struck by his observation in this book that “Creating



doesn’t make us unhappy; unhappiness makes us creative. To create is to live, and in living, we want only to create more, to set our foundations deeper and reach higher toward the sky.”

Wilson’s belief that melancholy

and joy are opposite sides of the same coin inspired me to ask him about the most joyful moment in his life.

“Wow,” he replied, “Nobody has ever asked me that before, but as clichéd as it sounds, I’d have to say that the most joyful moment of my life was the birth of my daughter, Una.”

“You read the book, so you know the depression that I was dealing with,” he continued, “but she saved me in a sense. I remember

again in another few years. It’s *that* good.

....And to think I almost missed it entirely! While flipping through the review pages in *Publisher’s Weekly* more than ten years ago, I noticed a starred review. Pausing just long enough to read the title I immediately dismissed it wrongly assuming it would be about a little old lady and a pop-culture Precious-Moments-kind-of-angel, and didn’t give it another thought. A year or so later my husband and I were in a bookstore in Covent Garden waiting to pay for our purchases when I noticed a large display of books with an arresting cover which turned out to be a detail from “The Dream of Saint Ursula” by the Venetian master painter Vittore Carpaccio who studied under Gentile Bellini. Now **this** was an angel I could take seriously! Then I read the back cover of the book which said: “After the death of her longtime friend and flatmate, retired British history teacher Julia Garnet does something completely out of character: She takes a six-month rental on a modest appartement in Venice. An atheist, a Communist, and a virgin, Julia finds herself falling beneath the seductive spell of the city’s intoxicating beauty and sensual religi-

osity. She befriends a young Italian boy, and English twins who are restoring a fourteenth-century chapel. And she falls in love for the first time in her life with an art dealer named Carlo.

“Juxtaposing Julia’s journey of self-discovery with the apocryphal tale of Tobias and the Archangel Raphael, *Miss Garnet’s Angel* tells a lyrical, incandescent story of love, loss, miracles, and redemption...and of one woman’s transformation and epiphany. It is ‘novel writing at its finest and most eloquent...’”

The *Sunday Telegraph* said, “If you like Penelope Fitzgerald or Barbara Pym, try Salley Vickers.” Since I love both Fitzgerald and Pym, of course I bought Salley Vickers’ book! All these years later it’s still an all-time-multiply-read favorite.

Reading and re-reading *Miss Garnet’s Angel* has brought me back several times to *My Angel Will Go Before You* by Georges Huber, originally published in 1983. Way back then *Publisher’s Weekly* called this exquisite work “... the best book written on the angels since Mortimer Adler’s *The Angels and Us*.” Angels have been a source of fascination, misunderstanding and misrepre-

(Continued on page 6)

sentation for a long, long time, especially since they were co-opted for entertainment purposes. In his introduction Sighard Kleiner, Abbot General of the Cistercians, says to Huber, a journalist, "Your book is very convincing. It combines a lively style with sound doctrine. You steer clear of legends and fairytales"

The cover of *My Angel Shall Go Before You* is a reproduction of "Tobias and the Angel," an altar painting by Florentine master Andrea del Verrocchio, who was working about the same time as Carppacio.

(An interesting side note: Leonardo da Vinci, who was a member of Verrocchio's studio, may have painted the fish and the dog in the painting. If so, "Tobias and the Angel" could be the first extant painting with input from Leonardo da Vinci.)

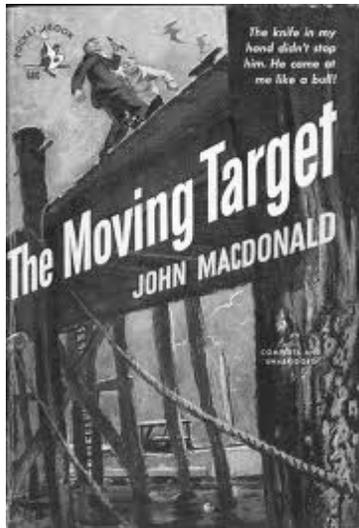
Re-reading well loved books brings us to different conclusions at different times, but it seems to me that reading a book again and again reveals more fully the wisdom and the radiance of the story it tells. Discovery becomes re-discovery.

(Reprinted from M Magazine, Summer 2012 issue)

ONE FESTIVAL, ONE BOOK

The Moving Target

This 1949 mystery novel written by Ross Macdonald is his first novel to feature the character of Lew Archer, who would define the author's career.



WE'RE WAITING FOR YOU ...

...to register for our 18th Magna cum Murder

Magna authors cannot be on panels unless they register! Magna readers cannot meet terrific mystery authors unless they register!

WE'RE WAITING FOR YOU ...

...to make your hotel reservations!

Magna guests need to make their hotel reservations prior to Oct. 15 to get the block rate. There are only 15 rooms reserved at each hotel, so make them as soon as possible.

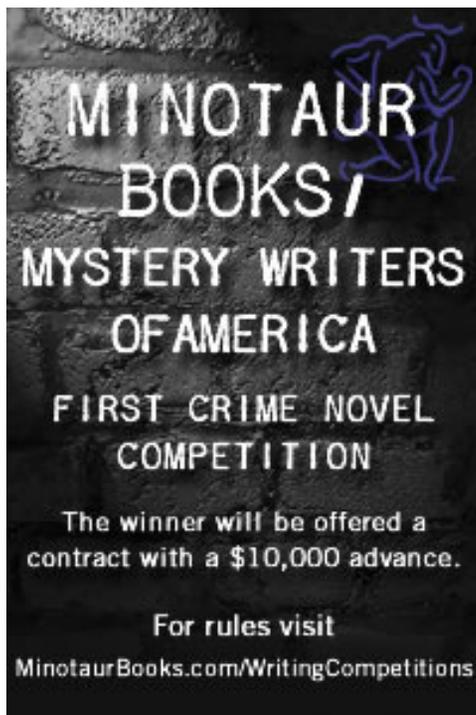
Holiday Inn, two-queen beds, \$95 plus tax
Comfort Inn and Suites, two full-size beds, \$85 plus tax
Fairfield Inn, single king or two-queens, \$89 plus tax
Signature Inn, two full-size beds, \$59.99 plus tax

MAGNACUMMURDER.COM

The 2013 Minotaur Books/ Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Competition is now open!

It's time to announce the 2013 Minotaur Books / Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel competition! This competition is open to all unpublished writers, and the winner receives a \$10,000 publishing contract from Minotaur Books and will be announced at MWA's annual Edgar Awards banquet.

For more detailed information on the competition and submission guidelines, visit www.MinotaurBooks.com/WritingCompetitions.



Bedside Biblio

Every once in a while, we like to catch up with what books our Magna authors and readers have stacked in their "to be read" piles.

Here's what they shared:

MARCIA BAUGH: I recently read and thoroughly enjoyed *The Return of Captain John Emmett* by Elizabeth Speller. Then I read (still in the WW I mode) Charles Todd's *A Bitter Truth* -- excellent story as usual for the Todds. I moved backward in time and am working on *Uneasy Spirits*, a Victorian mystery set in San Francisco by M. Louisa Locke. Other books on the table are not mysteries at the moment.

SUSAN BELSKY: Here's what I'm reading: *The Camp Follower* by Suzanne Adair on my Kindle. "Thud!" by Terry Pratchett on audiobook. And the books: *Dutch Me Deadly* by Maddy Hunter, *Desperate Housedogs* by Sparkle Abbey, *Disturbance* by Jan Burke. Of course, that's only the top of the pile.

SANDRA BRANNAN: Behind on my reading, since the summer sun keeps wiggling a 'come hither' finger to me to play outside. Recent reads were *Si-*

kander by M. Salahuddin Khan and *Force of Nature* by C.J. Box. Can't wait to read James Patterson's *Private #1 Suspect*, Ags Johnson's *The Sausage Maker's Daughter*, and Janet Evanovich's *Explosive Eighteen*. A bookseller recommended *Still Alice* by Lisa Genova, which I also look forward to reading soon.

PHILIP CIOFFARI: I'm reading and enjoying Jaden Terrell's *A Cupful of Midnight*, the second in the Jared McKean series.

DON COFFIN: I recently re-read James Grady's *Six Days of the Condor* and decided to see what else he had written (it's easier now that there are online used book sites). So I have a stack of books by James Grady: *Catch the Wind* (1980), *Runner in the Street* (1984), *Razor Game* (1985), *Steel Town* (1988), *Thunder* (1994), *White Flame* (1996), *Mad Dogs* (2006), We'll see how this works out.

JEANNE M. DAMS: Since I'm in Scotland right now, I've been reading lots of Alexander McCall Smith. *#1 Ladies' Detective Agency* I'd not read before, *Morality for Beautiful Girls*, and two or three in the *44 Scotland*

Street series, which are not mysteries, but are wonderful books. Aside from that, I'm devouring guide books to the amazing Neolithic structures found all over the Orkney Islands. If you're into really, really old mysteries, Google "Orkney." I was astounded.

W.S. GAGER: My bedside pile is rather small. I do most of my reading (listening) while chauffeuring kids to events. By the time I get to the bedside it is all I can do to flop in and another day is done. I just finished *Break Down* by Sara Paretsky and am reading a collection of short stories in a book called *Corner Cafe: A Tasty Selection of Short Stories* and admit I have one in the anthology but am enjoying the other stories immensely. Next up is Catherine Coulter's *Split Second*.

SARAH E. GLENN: Bedside table? I have a bookshelf next to my bed! Currently reading: *Victims* by Jonathan Kellerman. Nothing like delving into disturbed minds to give me sweet dreams.

TED HERTEL: I'm currently reading *Where the Shadows Lie* by Michael Ridpath. Stacked up under that is *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* by (obviously) Ellery Queen. Below that is my e-reader with Michael Connelly's *Nine Dragons*, Laura Lippman's

I'd Know You Anywhere, and all the Harry Potter books on it. Then there's also a paperback of Donna Leon's *Death at La Fenice*. Perhaps most unusual of all, just off to the side, are a half-dozen *Shadow* pulps from the early 1930s. I'm glad you asked only for "what's on the bedside table" since I don't even want to get into all the review books stacked up in the office or the ones in my personal collection that are piled not into my "to be read" pile but rather into my "to be read" rooms....

JOHN RAMSEY MILLER: I'm reading almost exclusively ebooks on Kindle: the last in *Wool* series and the *Molly Fyde* books by Hugh Howey; *Family Corleone* by Ed Falco; *FEAST Of CROWS* by George R.R. Martin; *Be The Pack Leader* by Caesar Millan; *The Fortunate Pilgrim* by Mario Puzo; *Threat Warning* by John Gilstrap. I have about fifty other books in line behind those.

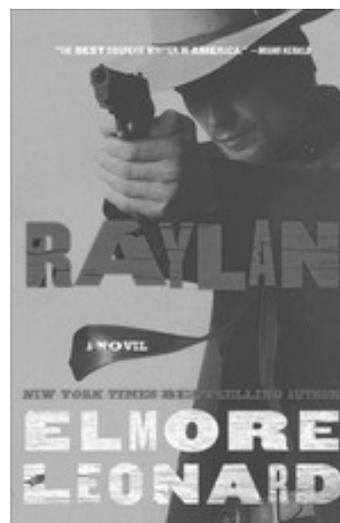
TONY PERONA: I'm reading D.C. Brod's *Getting Lucky* right now, and I have Julie Hyzy's latest, *Grace Among Thieves*, waiting. Also, I have the latest MWA anthology, *Vengeance*, hanging around for when I need a short mystery story.

MARY MONICA PULVER (aka Monica Ferris): On my head-

spatters of violence.

The main drawback to *Wolf Tickets* is that at times I had a hard time delineating between the two voices; but this one also comes with a warning for the casual reader who is unprepared for various scenes of violence, torture, and abuse (of substances, other people, and The King's English).

This came to me from Blasted Heath, a highly admirable ebook publisher from across the pond who are putting out some crackling contemporary noir. Recommended for fans of the hard-boiled.



RAYLAN BY ELMORE LEONARD

Federal Marshal Raylan Givens takes on a variety of Kentucky criminals, from organ traffickers to corporate thieves to cold-blooded killers, in Elmore Leonard's *Raylan*.

Leonard's laconic, trigger-eager lawman has appeared in several earlier crime novels but has become more prominent since the FX television show *Justified* featured the character, in a solid portrayal by Timothy Olyphant.

Unfortunately I found the storytelling in this one more television-sized, picking up characters and situations from the show and sometimes riffing on them in different ways; but I felt Raylan never really creating a large enough stage for the characters, as one might hope for when freed from the constrictions of TV production.

That being said, it is a quick, enjoyable read and pretty solid for a late entry in Leonard's bibliography, which has run hot and cold in recent years.

(John Dalton is the Station Director of Whitewater Community Television in Richmond, IN, by day and a freelance writer by night.)

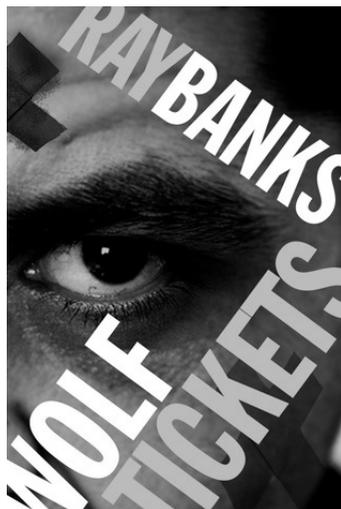


in a snowy Norwegian mountain pass, and the survivors--including a paralyzed former policewoman, a troubled teenager, a magnetic religious leader, and at least one killer--manage to make it to a ski lodge--where their real problems begin--in Anne Holt's thriller *1222*.

Even though the novel has the locked-room trappings of an Agatha Christie novel *1222* is quite a crackling thriller, despite featuring an unusually dour protagonist (even by the high standards of the typically gloomy Scandinavian mystery) in the paralyzed, retired detective.

The storytelling is exceptional, ratcheting up the suspense as the reader learns about a mysterious passenger sequestered behind armed bodyguards, various political ramifications involving high levels in the Norwegian government, and an increasing body count.

Holt is apparently quite popular in her native Norway, and although this is one of the later novels in her series featuring the reluctant police detective I believe it is the first translated into English. I hope to see more of this series.



WOLF TICKETS BY RAY BANKS

Two old friends--who bonded over shared sociopathic tendencies and various addiction problems-- find themselves chasing an old girlfriend who ran off with another man, a cache of drugs, and a prize leather jacket; soon things get worse, then worse again, in Ray Banks' *Wolf Tickets*.

I thoroughly enjoyed an early outing from Edinburgh noir author Banks, *Dead Money*, another very tough crime novel, so I was eager to pick this one up. Once again this novel features two knockaround protagonists--although in this case with chapters in alternating voices--and a storyline that veers from sardonic humor to chilling

board (which is a shelf with lights in it) is *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, *The Bible for Dummies*, the *Minnesota Permit to Carry A Firearm Fundamentals*, and *The February Trouble* by Neil Albert. I've just finished Robin Blake's *A Dark Anatomy*.

SHELLY REUBEN: I am reading the following: *The Eighty Dollar Champion* by Elizabeth Letts, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Saint Joan of Arc* by Mark Twain, *After Dark* by Wilkie Collins.

C. L. SHORE: I've finished *Gardens of Kyoto*, currently residing at the bottom of my small stack of bedside books. It is not a traditional mystery. Instead, the reader discovers family secrets as the pages are turned. Currently, I'm reading *A Dark Dividing*. One review states that you shouldn't read it alone at night unless your doors are locked! I'm not that far into the book yet, but I am intrigued by the promise of future suspense that appears in the first pages.

JOANNA CAMPBELL SLAN: I'm reading--*Charlotte Brontë's Thunder* by Michele Carter, *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* by Margot Livesey. Since my new book--*Death of a Schoolgirl* (Berkley Trade/Aug.7)--picks up where Brontë's *Jane Eyre* left off, I'm

reading everything on the Brontës that I can!

LARRY D. SWEAZY: Right now, I'm in the middle of *Lonesome Animals*, a debut novel by Bruce Holbert. Beautiful, sparse writing, set in the West during the Great Depression. Loving it so far, but it's gritty, hard-hitting, and doesn't shy away from violence, which makes it a perfect read for me. On my TBR (to be read) pile: *Edge of Dark Water* by Joe R. Lansdale, *Napoleon's Pyramids* by William Dietrich, *Blood, Bones, & Butter* by Gabrielle Hamilton.

RONALD TIERNEY: I'm going through an odd period at the moment. Just finished *Reticence*, a book by Jean-Philippe Toussaint. It is perhaps a send up of noir. In the middle of *Death Sentences* by Japanese author Kawamata Chiaki. I'm not sure what it is yet. The book jacket has a quote from William Gibson saying it is "A hardboiled, sharply surreal fable about the power of the written word." Looking for something a little more basic next.

CAROLINE AND CHARLES TODD: What's on the bedside table? We are lucky enough to get books pre-pub, and we've been reading a lot of those. Two of

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them are mysteries to look for. One is *The Unseen* by Katherine Webb. It's a story on two levels, 1911 and 2011, and does it work? Beautifully! And I've just got Hank Phillippi Ryan's newest, *The Other Woman*, which I started last night. It's a grabber, let me tell you. I loved her series, and this is a stand-alone. Earlier I'd read Deborah Crombie's *No Mark Upon Her*, which is the latest in her series featuring her British Police characters. I've always enjoyed her books, and this one, set in Henley, is about the sculls that are so popular on that stretch of the river, and what happens when one is overturned, killing the rower. I've always been interested in Henley, but it's her characters that I keep coming back for. They're old friends. And out in England but soon to come

here is a book about Agatha Christie's year-long journey around the world, taken from her diary and her photographs. Agatha Christie water skiing??? There's proof. I've seen it. Speaking of Agatha, *Agatha Christie: The Making Of Murder* by John Curran, is a wonderful insight into how she wrote her mysteries. Worth looking for.

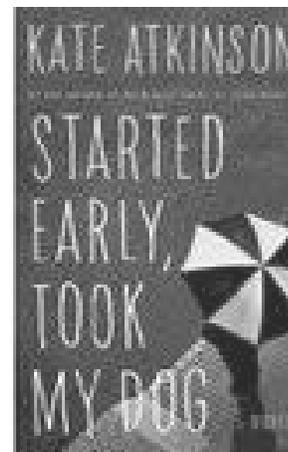
Charles has been reading *Cronkite*, about Walter Cronkite, of course, a bio by Douglas Brinkley, just out from HarperCollins. He says it's fascinating. And he's in line for *The Other Woman*, after I've read it.

So that's where you find us.

(Magna should be great this year with SJ. She's really terrific, and I'd love to be there. We were just telling someone last week how great Magna was, and that they ought to go to one.)

Book Beat

By John Oak Dalton



STARTED EARLY, TOOK MY DOG
BY KATE ATKINSON

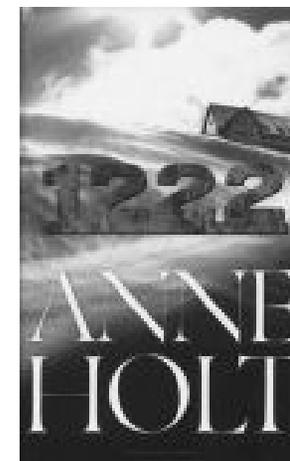
A retired British policeman impulsively buys a child from a drug addict; a sometime private eye rescues a dog from an abusive man at a park; and an elderly actress struggles with dementia while co-starring on a hit detective show; how these stories cross, loop back, and fold in on each other forms the heart of *Started Early, Took My Dog*.

I picked this up on a whim based on the title alone, having never heard of Kate Atkinson. I found a rewarding, complex mystery that may be one of my favorites of the year.

The story picks up threads of the

notorious Manchester Ripper case of the 70s and reaches all the way to contemporary times, following the life arcs of many complicated, fully-realized characters, including tarnished cops and well-meaning criminals. The diverse storylines, which include a humorous running background thread about a cheesy cop show, are very nicely tied up at the end.

Atkinson is a fine literary writer with all of the requisite beats for mystery fans. Recommended.



1222 BY ANNE HOLT

A terrible accident derails a train

(Continued on page 12)



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