

# IN A MELLOW TONE

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Since the last newsletter there have been a few changes, the most notable of which being that, yet again, we have moved – this time from the wild west of Cornwall to the occasionally wilder East Midlands. Back to Nottingham, no less.

What was it Graham Greene said in his introduction to *A GUN FOR SALE*? "I don't know why a certain wry love of Nottingham lodged in my imagination ... "

I came to live here first in the mid-sixties, in order to take up a post as an English teacher in a secondary school in Heanor, a small town just over the border into Derbyshire, and then returned in the late-seventies, initially to study for a masters degree in American Studies at the University of Nottingham.

It was during that longer second period that I wrote the scripts for *HARD CASES*, a drama series centred around the staff and clients of an inner city office of the probation service, something which led, indirectly, to the first of the Resnick novels, *LONELY HEARTS*.

Back when I was teaching, my route to Heanor would either take me through Eastwood, the mining town where D. H. Lawrence was born and lived as a young man, or through Ilkeston and along the side of the Erewash Valley, as described by Lawrence in the magnificent opening chapter of *THE RAINBOW*. Coincidentally, where we lived, much later, for a year in Cornwall was just down the lane from Mermaid Cottage, which was where Lawrence lived with his wife, Frieda, during the First World War, and where he planned to start an artistic community with other writers such as Katherine Mansfield.

In the end, our Cornish endeavour was little more successful in the long term than that of the Lawrences, though we did leave of our own accord, rather than being forced out on the assumption that we were signalling to German U-boats with our washing!

Those of you who've read *FLESH AND BLOOD*, will know that at the beginning of the novel, its hero, Frank Elder, is living in a small cottage adjacent to the one Lawrence occupied, having moved down there from Nottingham. Art imitating life or vice-versa? Since I wrote the book partly in London and partly in New Zealand and well before moving to that part of Cornwall myself, it's more the usual confusion of the two.

Mention of FLESH AND BLOOD brings me to the recent Crime Writers' Association Awards, at which I was delighted to be presented with the Silver Dagger for Fiction, 2004. The strong shortlist included Mo Hayder's TOKYO, Val McDermid's THE TORMENT OF OTHERS, James W. Nichol's MIDNIGHT CAB, Sara Paretsky's BLACKLIST and Laura Wilson's THE LOVER, and the winner of the Gold Dagger was Sara Paretsky.

This annual shindig used to take place in the evening, a dinner rather than a lunch, with black tie and serious frocks pretty much the order of the day, and the awards being presented by the likes of the late Princess Margaret. Fortunate enough to be short-listed for the second Resnick novel, ROUGH TREATMENT, and faced with the prospect of shaking the diminutive royal hand, I forswore the option of renting a formal suit, threw caution to the winds, and bought one instead. After all, I remember justifying to myself, there'll be plenty of other occasions, surely.

That was back in 1990. Reginald Hill won the gold, Mike Phillips the silver, the suit has long passed on to charity shop heaven, and there have been times over the intervening years when I confess to wondering what would come first, my bus pass or another nomination. As it happened, the bus pass won, but only just.

So it was with a genuine sense of pleasure that I heard my name called and went up to get my award, careful to take the long way round so as to milk the applause, but also to clear my head – this was the last presentation and by that time we'd been seated for close to three hours, while the champagne stocks around us dwindled considerably. I'm pleased to report that I managed to remember most of the speech I'd been rehearsing through several sleepless nights, even negotiating the difficult phrase 'estimable editor' with such aplomb that I said it twice.

Then it was soon over. Hugs, handshakes, kisses and the train back to Nottingham awaited. An easier journey, perhaps, than that of the American writer Jeffery Deaver, who might have had just a little difficulty explaining his way back into the States with not one dagger in his bag, but two – the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger for the best thriller and the Dagger for best short story. "Excuse me, sir, but if you wouldn't mind stepping over here ... "

Jeffery's winning story was from his collection, TWISTED, rather than his contribution to MEN FROM BOYS, though I was pleased that two stories from that anthology were short-listed – Mark Billingham's "Dancing Towards the Blade" and Don Winslow's "Dougjie Doughnuts". MEN FROM BOYS has proved a popular collection, is selling well in paperback in this country, and will be published in the States towards the end of the year. Meanwhile, no less than four stories from it have been selected by Maxim Jakubowski for Allison & Busby's BEST BRITISH MYSTERIES, 2005: the Billingham mentioned above, Bill James' "Like an Arrangement", Peter Robinson's "Shadow on the Water", Brian Thompson's "Geezers" and my own "Chance".

At the end of October I went to Finland for the Helsinki Book Fair. This is a hugely successful affair, with ten thousand visitors on the Saturday that I was there, the various stands buzzing with people interested in books and reading, and no less than eight different author interviews and discussions taking place simultaneously throughout the day. There were the usual signings and informal talks with readers, new and old, and even – just – time to slip away for coffee and a cinnamon bun. Something of a Finnish delicacy, it seems.

My publishers, Otava, proved, not for the first time, to be a model of friendly hospitality and efficiency and hosted a fine dinner at which the oysters were as good as had been promised and at which I had the pleasure of meeting the Spanish author Carlos Ruiz Zafon, whose book, *THE SHADOW OF THE WIND*, a high romantic tale of love, lust, hidden identity and forgotten books, is sweeping all before it. I was also fortunate to meet again several members of the Finnish Whodunnit Society and, in their company, the Icelandic crime writer, Arnaldur Indridason, whose *JAR CITY* has recently been published in translation by The Harvill Press.

Otava have just published *WASTED YEARS*, number five in the Resnick series, and, to mark this, my Finnish translator, Markku Pakkila, suggested that I might write a new Resnick short story to appear in the magazine Otava produce for the Book Fair. The result was "Well, You Needn't", named after a Thelonus Monk tune, and set amongst the still festering aftermath of the Miners' Strike on the day that Resnick celebrates his birthday. He's not telling anybody which one.

Talk of translation reminds me that, in France, Rivages have recently brought their Resnick publications up to date with the tenth novel, *LAST RITES*, and *NOW'S THE TIME*, the collected stories. The stories were translated by Marie Gratias and her father, Jean-Paul, who has been responsible himself for translating the majority of the novels. Brilliantly.

*ASH AND BONE*, a second novel featuring Frank Elder, will be published by William Heinemann in April. Set principally in London, with occasional forays north, it brings Elder out of his bolt hole in Cornwall to assist in the investigation into the death of a former colleague. For those of you anxious to get a taste of this, the first chapter is included in the paperback edition of *FLESH AND BLOOD*, out from Arrow in early February. More news of a possible third Elder novel next time.

Some years ago now, I recorded a number of poems with the jazz group Second Nature, and these were made available on a limited edition audio cassette under the title, GHOSTS OF A CHANCE. Slowly keeping up with the technology, these tracks have now been remastered and are available on CD titled TILL IT SHINES, together with four unaccompanied readings from STILL WATER and IN A TRUE LIGHT.

Many of the poems – which come from the collections GHOSTS OF A CHANCE and BLUER THAN THIS – take jazz or jazz musicians as their subject – Chet Baker, Charlie Parker, David Murray, Thelonious Monk – and Monk features in one of the prose pieces, as does Milt Jackson.

Bop Noir, somebody christened this stuff, and as a label I think it works.

Any jazz fans out there in search of Christmas presents for themselves – poetry fans, Resnick fans – anyone who simply wants to pour themselves a glass of something, dim the lights, sit back and listen to my mellifluous tones, could do worse than order a copy of TILL IT SHINES now!

To order, please fill in the form below and send it, with your cheque (no credit cards, sorry) to John Harvey, 41 South Road, Nottingham NG2 7AH, U.K.

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