

IN A MELLOW TONE

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Well, *Flesh and Blood* has picked up another award to sit alongside the CWA Silver Dagger. At this year's Bouchercon Mystery Convention in Chicago, it was honoured with the Barry Award for Best British Crime Novel of 2004, courtesy of *Deadly Pleasures Mystery Magazine*.

There was a strong short list – *The Burning Girl* by Mark Billingham, *The Dramatist* by Ken Bruen, *Tokyo* (U.S. title: *The Devil of Nanking*) by Mo Hayder, *The Crime Trade* by Simon Kernick and *First Drop* by Zoë Sharp – which made it all the more pleasing to get the final nod.

Since I couldn't be at the ceremony, I'd taken the precaution of asking my friend Mark Billingham if, in the unlikely event of my winning, he would accept the award on my behalf – something which, I'm reliably informed, he did with his customary charm and good humour.

For those of you who don't know, Bouchercon itself is a vast affair with well in excess of a thousand delegates – readers, writers, booksellers, publishers – and is usually held in the States, although on two occasions it has been in Britain, once in London and, more recently – 1995 – in Nottingham. In 2008, for those of you can dare to think ahead that far, it will be in Baltimore, and I'm pleased to say that I shall be there as International Guest of Honour. Not only that, but a certain Mr Billingham will be present as Toastmaster, whipping everyone into line at the awards dinner in addition to making the keynote speech.

There's no reason, of course, why writers should be good public speakers, though Mark, who still earns a crust or two as a stand-up comic, has a professional pedigree to fall back on. It's an art, nevertheless, at which some excel. Anyone who has heard Colin Dexter will know that he is blessed with a sense of timing that would have been the envy of many a music hall comedian, where there any of them still left standing, and Reginald Hill, who in Nottingham made the best Bouchercon speech I've yet

heard, is every bit as caustic as he is funny. And then there is Alexander McCall Smith ...

Best known for his *Number 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, McCall Smith was one of the guests at this year's Melbourne Writers' Festival, where I was fortunate enough to share a platform with him on two occasions. A brilliant – and charming – man as well as a best-selling writer, he was, to me, a revelation as both a speaker and a reader, reducing me on several occasions to near tears of laughter.

Humour was in no short supply at the Festival and one session, devoted to Melbourne and Crime, found two local writers, Shane Maloney and Peter Temple, in scathing form, both displaying the kind of coruscating wit that strips paint from walls and takes no prisoners. More of Temple later.

Others had told me I would have a good time in Melbourne and so I did. The organisation held up well without being over fussy, audiences were generally in the hundreds, and the atmosphere was relaxed without being somnambulistic. Most of the questions in public sessions were sharp and to the point.

As well as doing publicity in Australia, I spent close to a week in New Zealand, where Random House had organised a pretty full programme of media interviews and bookstore signings. Particularly enjoyable was a Radio New Zealand programme called *Playing Favourites*, which goes out at peak time on Saturday morning, and is hosted by Kim Hill, a much revered and feared broadcaster with a sharp tongue and a reputation for taking writers and politicians apart on air.

Pre-warned, I entered the studio with no little trepidation, and there were a few anxious moments when I was given the once-over by Kim Hill's dog before meeting Kim herself. Happily, however, whatever fears I might have had proved groundless. The half-hour, which is arranged around four pieces of music I'd been asked to choose beforehand, passed smoothly and easily and was, in fact, one of the most enjoyable I've done. Not only that, it was clearly listened to a large number of people, because for the rest of my time in New Zealand people kept telling me they'd heard the programme and commented on how relaxed the two of us had sounded. And the music? Louis Armstrong, Gram Parsons with Emmylou Harris, Elvis Costello and Dusty Springfield.

There was something strange about being in Australia while the Ashes

were being played for back in England; sitting up late in a hotel room in Melbourne, for instance, watching the Trent Bridge Test and thinking, hmm, we live just a short way down the road from where that's happening – thinking, moreover, if the English team can just hang in here, we might actually win this.

Even more surprising, though more low key, were the League Two soccer results I kept finding in the small print – Notts County seemed to be winning all or most of their games, certainly not losing. And, lo and behold, it was true, there they were when we returned, top of the table.

One of the questions Alexander McCall Smith was asked in Melbourne was about the number of honorary degrees and doctorates he held, a question he answered modestly but at some length as there are a goodly number. Thankfully, the same question wasn't then addressed to me, though, had it been, I would have been tempted to mention the occasion earlier in the year, when, at a talk I was giving for the Local Studies department of the local library, I was asked if I would accept honorary Life Membership of the Notts County F. C. Supporters' Club – an honour which took me totally by surprise and which I was proud and delighted to accept.

Amongst the books I've read so far this year, three stand out.

Alice Munro's latest collection of short stories, *Runaway*, is close to faultless, and I am in awe of writing which is so tight and well-turned, and yet which suggests so much more than is actually on the page. A sentence, a paragraph, and you have the whole of people's lives exposed. If I could write short stories that came even close to being as good as this, I swear that's all I'd want to do.

The other two books are, in the widest sense of the term, crime novels - that is, they are novels which have, as part of their subject, crime.

Don Winslow is a writer I've admired for quite a long time – his story in *Men from Boys* is a gem – and with *The Power of the Dog*, he's achieved something special. The word epic is overused, but that is what this is – a vast but far from sprawling narrative that ricochets between Mexico and the United States as it follows the rise of the drug cartels and the attempts of enforcement agencies to combat them. Characters who we see at first like dots on the horizon, gradually take shape and form until we feel we know them and care about the mostly terrible things that happen to them. Quite

how Winslow manages to keep all of the pieces of his extraordinary canvas in play and in perspective, I'm not sure, but he does and the net result is that you finish the book with a sense of gratified exhaustion.

The Power of the Dog, published by Knopf in the States and William Heinemann in the UK, is relatively easy to get hold of, less so Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore*, which is published in Australia by Text Publishing, based in Melbourne. Again, Temple is a writer whose earlier books I've very much enjoyed, but this has to be his best so far – lovely characterisation, a serious theme, an atmosphere you can all but reach out and touch. Temple's prose style is brusque and tender, according to need, and he uses the format of the crime novel to lay bare those parts of life we too often refuse to see. Talking about the novel to a critic from the Melbourne paper, *The Age*, she said she thought *The Broken Shore* was not only a great Australian crime novel but a great Australian novel, and I think she's probably right.

Now for a little publication news of my own. The second Frank Elder novel, *Ash & Bone*, already published here by William Heinemann, will be published in the U.S. in December, under Otto Penzler's imprint at Harcourt. Terrific jacket, by the way. *Darkness & Light*, the third Elder book, is going through the rewrite process even now, or would be if I weren't writing this, and is due out from Heinemann in April of 2006.

Nick's Blues, my novel for young adult readers, was published in France by Editions Syros Jeunesse in April – it's first publication anywhere. Also in France, Rivages are this month bringing out translations of both *Flesh & Blood* and *Men from Boys*.

Two new Charlie Resnick stories hover on the horizon. *The Sun, The Moon and The Stars* will appear in *The Detection Collection*, an anthology of stories by members of The Detection Club which Orion are publishing this autumn, and *Home* will appear initially in *The Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, after which it will be collected in *Sunday Night & Monday Morning*, a small press edition of stories by Nottingham writers, which is being published by Five Leaves Publications here in the city.

*John Harvey, September 2005
Nottingham, England*