

IN A MELLOW TONE

No. 24 A John Harvey/Charlie Resnick Newsletter Autumn 2006
www.mellotone.co.uk

As I mentioned in the previous newsletter, a remark by the American writer and editor, Robert J. Randisi, prompted me to promote the two Cambridgeshire police officers, Will Grayson and Helen Walker, from the smaller canvas of the short story, *Snow, Snow, Snow*, which appeared in Bob's collection, *Greatest Hits: Stories of Assassins, Hit Men & Hired Guns* [Carroll & Graf, US, 2005] to the fuller picture of the full-length novel. Hence, *Gone to Ground*, which opens with the discovery of the body of a murdered Cambridge lecturer and expands to take in some familiar territory in and around Nottingham, by way of the windswept East Anglian fens. And no, before you ask, this is not an attempt to move into the territory of dreaming spires and academia long the province of Colin Dexter, Veronica Stallwood, Michelle Spring and others; the ground covered here ranges from the activities of ultra right wing extremists and homophobic gangs to unscrupulous businessmen and the barely remembered world of British 50s film noir.

William Heinemann publish *Gone to Ground* here in February, 2007, together with the Arrow paperback of *Darkness & Light*, and Harcourt will follow in the US later that year. *Ash & Bone* is published by Harcourt in paper this December and in France by Rivages in October.

Meanwhile, Charlie Resnick lives! The BBC are set to repeat Gordon House's excellent adaptation of *Wasted Years*, brilliantly read by Phillip Jackson, and with an eclectic and appropriate musical soundtrack ranging from Thelonious Monk to Neil Diamond, on BBC Radio 7, beginning October 16th. Those of you not within range of the Beeb's digital transmitters, can, presumably, pick it up on the internet.

A little further into the future, I'm due to write a new Resnick story to be published by the Nottingham-based Five Leaves Press in their new Crime Express series of longish (12,000 - 15,000 words) short stories which will be issued in editions of around 1,000 copies. The story I'm thinking of will also involve Jack Kiley, the one-time policeman and, briefly, professional soccer player, who currently ekes out some kind of a fictional living as a private detective based in north London, and about whom I've written a number of tales

already - check the web site for details. In this story, a case Kiley is investigating will take him to Nottingham, where he and Resnick will find some common ground reminiscing about Kiley's one appearance at Meadow Lane, coming off the bench for Charlton Athletic against Notts County in what was then the League Cup.

Jack and Charlie - now there's a possible partnership, if ever I saw one

And mention of Notts County can't be allowed to pass without reference to last Saturday's league game away to Barnet - their only London fixture, sadly - in which they fought their way back from a two goal deficit to a three-two victory. Exciting stuff - one of the best matches I've seen in quite a while - and it was good to be there amidst the visiting supporters cheering the team on, my daughter Molly alongside me, rattling away enthusiastically with her old-fashioned wooden rattle.

Another project I'm happy to be involved with is a forthcoming story collection called *Paris Noir*, which will be edited by Maxim Jakubowski and will include French writers alongside English and American. It will be published in the UK by Serpent's Tail, with a French edition from Rivages, who, coincidentally - and happily - are my regular publishers on that side of the Channel.

Now, as it happens, last year I wrote a story called *Just Friends* for an American collection *Damn Near Dead*, edited by Duane Swierczynski and published by Busted Flush Press in Houston. The story - itself a try out for a longer work - centres around the relationship between three young men coming to adulthood in late 50s London, one of whom - Val - is a jazz musician. And buried on page 5 is this throwaway sentence:

Towards the end, Patrick took her off for a few days to Paris, a big deal in those days, and managed to secure a gig for Val while he was there, guesting at the Chat Qui Peche with René Thomas and Pierre Michelot.

How opportune is that? Of course, I need to come up with some kind of narrative to help things along, but *Paris Noir* will give me the chance to get to know one of my characters better - to walk him round the block, as Elmore Leonard once described such activities, even if, as in this case, the block will be on the Left Bank.

Amongst a batch of recent CDs purchased from the estimable Red Lick Records [www.redlick.com] is Dave Alvin's *West of the West*, his versions of songs by California-connected writers such as Tom Waits and Merle Haggard. In his sleeve notes, Alvin says it was listening to John Stewart's *California Bloodlines* that gave him the idea - something

which made me think immediately of two fellow authors with whom I shared, at one time, an almost obsessive regard for Stewart's music: Laurence James and Angus Wells. Laurence, who was responsible for me becoming a writer in the first place, and with whom I wrote the western series *Herne the Hunter*, died, far too young, from cancer in 2000; Angus, who worked with me on a number of similar series, including *Hawk* and *The Gringos*, lost his life in a house fire earlier this year. It's sentimental - but true - to say that I shall think of them when I play this music, but then that's the kind of music it is.

Jon McGregor's writing doesn't admit much sentimentality, if any at all - far too grounded and precise, at the same time as allowing the reader a range of possibilities. Indeed, the way of which his second novel, *So Many Ways to Begin*, is structured encourages us to make connections which may later prove true or false. Like a kind of detective story, we follow the protagonist through an investigation into his past, turning up clues, following leads which are sometimes dead ends, sometimes chinks of light in the darkness. I heard Jon read from the novel a couple of times before I actually read it and I think that may have helped my appreciation; it's a terrific book, I think, low-key much of the time yet compelling, and I was in tears twice before the end - sentiment and not sentimentality.

The other novel that's given me a great deal of pleasure recently is *Weekend* by William McIlvanney. Set in and around a residential study weekend on a Scottish island, with many of the extracurricular activities I'm told such weekends engender, McIlvanney moves skilfully between the biting humourous and the knowingly humane, with enough scathing insights into the male ego to make many a man wince and shrivel. It's McIlvanney's first book in ten years and, as such, all the more welcome, as the packed crowd that heard him read from it at the Edinburgh International Book Festival made clear.

In conversation with Ian Rankin at the recent Harrogate Crime Festival - that's In Conversation in caps, there were 400-plus listening and looking on - Ian made clear the extent to which he had been influenced by McIlvanney's crime novels, especially the 1977 *Laidlaw*. He confirmed this in a recent Guardian Review piece (16.09.06) about *Fleshmarket Close* - "A proper literary novelist," he says of McIlvanney, he made it "OK to write crime fiction" - and to set in in a Scottish city.'

Laidlaw was a major influence on me, too, when I began writing the Resnick books, as were the ten Martin Beck novels by the Swedish authors, Maj Sjöwall & Per Wahloo, the first pair of which, *Roseanna* and *The Man Who Went Up In Smoke*, have recently been reissued by Harper Perennial, with the apparent intention of bringing all ten back into print. Not before time.

Finally, here's a few places where I shall be appearing during the coming months:

Ilkley Literature Festival

Saturday, 7th October

Otley Courthouse. 1pm - 4.30pm

Murder in the Courthouse: Discussions, readings etc. etc. with Frances Fyfield, Sophie Hannah, Dreda Say Mitchell and myself.

Details: admin@ilkleyliteraturefestival.org.uk

01943 816714

Ambit Magazine Reading

Tuesday, 10th October

The Bountiful Cow, 51 Eagle St., Holborn, London. 7.30pm

Two fifteen minute readings, alongside poets Richard Dyer & Sonja Besford.

24 Heures du Livre - Le Mans

Saturday 14th, & Sunday 15th October

Details: info@24heuresdulivre.fr www.24heuresdulivre.fr

Jazz at Dexter's

Tuesday, 7th November. 8.00pm

The Five Ways, Sherwood, Nottingham

Reading with jazz group, Second Nature

Details: 0115 878 0485

Noir Sur la Ville

Lamballe, Brittany

Saturday 18th & Sunday 19th November

Details: www.fureurdunoir.com

In order to save on postage and get the newsletter to you more quickly, we are now sending it out by email where possible. If you can receive your newsletter in this way, please email us at john@mellotone.co.uk

*John Harvey, September 2006
London, England*