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BookReviews

A one-joke southside guide

Alistair Cooke's 1954 book 'The Southside' is a classic guide to the area

Books

The South



From crime to punishment



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From crime to punishment

Ask the Parrot by Richard Stark (who is really crime writer Donald E Westlake) is a Parker book. Stark has been writing them since the 1960s, with a hiatus in the 1980s and 1990s. Parker is a career criminal who lets nothing stand in the way of his various crimes, and he always manages to survive the most dangerous situations. In this novel he is on the point of being captured by the police when a man called Lindahl rescues him. This guy wants Parker to help him rob the racecourse from which he was lately dismissed. Parker agrees, but things go wrong, as they usually do in a Parker novel. This is vintage Parker, although the ending is a bit rushed. And is the man going a bit soft? In this one he ties some people up and holds them as hostages, instead of killing them as he usually does.

In Ken Bruen's *Cross*, we are also reintroduced to a series character. This is Jack Taylor, ex-policeman, ex-alcoholic and now sometime private detective. He trudges the mean streets of Galway in search of wrongs to right, indulging in a stream-of-consciousness tirade as he goes. Here he is helping his policewoman friend Ridge to find the people who crucified a boy and then burned his sister to death. There is no great mystery about who those people are, as they are introduced to us at an early stage. The strength of Bruen's work lies in the language and the characterisation. This is noir literature at its best. Bruen is an Irish treasure as a thriller writer, and his international reputation is blossoming also - as it should.

AND DECLAN BURKE'S *The Big O* carries on the tradition of Irish noir with its Elmore Leonard-like style. Here the dialogue is as slick as an ice run, the plot is nicely intricate, and the character drawing is spot on. There is a large list of folk involved, from Karen, who does stick-ups, through Rossi, who is Joe Pesci to a T if the book is ever filmed, through Ray, the phlegmatic hostage keeper, through Frank, who wants his ex-wife kidnapped, through Detective Doyle, who is on the lookout for a man, and through Anna, who is a large dog. Throw them all into the mix and the result is a high-octane novel that fairly coruscates with tension.

KT McCaffrey's *Bishop's Pawn*, on the other hand, is a more traditional mystery novel. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. The heroine is investigative journalist Emma Boylan and she is

Vincent Banville

Ask the Parrot
By Richard Stark
Quercus, £10

Cross
By Ken Bruen
Bantam Press, £10.99

The Big O
By Declan Burke
Hag's Head Press, €12.99

Bishop's Pawn
By KT McCaffrey
Robert Hale, £17.99

The Savage Altar
By Asa Larsson
Viking, £12.99

Bad Blood
By Linda Fairstein
Little, Brown, £14.99

The Watchman
By Robert Crais
Orion, £14.99

shocked to read her own and her husband's obituary notices in the local papers. It soon transpires that this is connected to the suicide of a Catholic bishop's daughter, who shot herself in front of a number of witnesses that included Emma and her husband. Now these witnesses are beginning to meet with mysterious deaths and Emma fears that she is on the list. The novel holds one's interest, although it is not too difficult to guess at the identity of the killer, or killers. The melodramatic, over-the-top writing actually helps to lend the book authenticity and entertainment value.

The Savage Altar by Asa Larsson is beautifully translated from the Swedish by Marlaine Delargy.

The writing here, for a thriller, is very good, with the descriptive passages being very fine: the snow; the silence; the Aurora Borealis bleeding colour into the night sky.

The protagonist is Rebecka Martinsson, a corporate lawyer living in Stockholm. She is called back to her home town of Kiruna, in the north of Sweden, when the body of the pastor of The Source of All Our Strength church is found brutally murdered, with his head and hands removed. Rebecka finds herself caught up in a maelstrom of deceit and intrigue, with the villagers distrustful of her and the police equally suspicious. Stubbornly she carries on, and in a blood-spattered climax uncovers the truth, in the process nearly losing her life. *The Savage Altar* is a superior thriller, and I'd highly recommend it.

SIMILARLY WITH LINDA Fairstein's *Bad Blood*. Fairstein is an ex-assistant DA of Manhattan's sex crimes unit, so she knows what she is talking about. Here her assistant DA series character, Alexandra Cooper, is trying a case where a man called Brendan Quillian is accused of being responsible for the death of his wife Amanda, even though he was away in Boston at the time. No one expects Quillian to be found guilty, and Cooper has an almost impossible case on her hands. In the middle of the trial there is an explosion which interrupts the construction of a water tunnel, and when a connection between the tunnel workers and Quillian is found, Cooper has to go 600 feet below the streets of Manhattan to investigate. And it is down there that the climax of the book takes place, with Cooper and her detective friend Mike Chapman in mortal danger. This is also a far-above-the-ordinary thriller, and it keeps one engrossed right to the end.

Robert Crais's *The Watchman* reunites his series characters Elvis Cole and Joe Pike, with Pike the main man in this particular effort. He is hired to bodyguard rich girl Larkin Conner Barkley, who, during a motor accident, witnessed the return of a notorious mob figure from exile in Columbia. The FBI puts her into witness protection, but her cover is blown and an attempt is made on her life. Pike, the human Action Man, is then brought in to save her from further attempts. He enlists the aid of private detective Cole, and between them they seek to protect the girl, while at the same time trying to uncover the

**Above, from
left: Ken Bruen
and Declan
Burke**

mole who keeps revealing her hiding places.

This is a novel of suspense, and it keeps racking up the tension until the very end. Crais is an old-timer at this kind of thing and *The Watchman* is him at his very best.

◆ Vincent Banville is a writer and critic

