

J BRENDAN RYAN  
[Brendanryan9@gmail.com](mailto:Brendanryan9@gmail.com)

December 8, 2011

Hail Bookpals,

“Hey Brendan, the holidays are coming and I need some ideas for gifts. Would you mind writing another bookletter, recognizing it’s only been two months since the last one, and give me some book gift suggestions”. “Why of course, I would be delighted to do so”.

Actually this conversation never took place and not one person has asked me to do this. However, I know at least some of you are thinking these thoughts (yeah, sure) and therefore I am hustling out a new letter.

Of course, the real reason for doing so is I have read so many good books in just the last few months that it is appropriate to share them with you. And by the way, some of these would make very fine gifts.

Now in my continuing effort to keep all readers at least a little bit off balance, we will again revert to former practice where we will first talk about books from “new authors” – i.e. new to the bookletter.

1. *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson

“Excuse me, you actually read serious books?” Actually, yes I do and this was a great one. I must confess I have always been a huge admirer of Steve Jobs and of Apple. I think you would have to go a long, long way to find someone who has had a more profound impact on humanity and the way we live than this boy. And this book lives up to that view of this man. This definitely is a pretty hefty tome (630 pages) but it is a terrific read. Walter Isaacson is a highly qualified biographer and also, as you probably know, was a big time reporter and editor of Time Magazine among others. So he gets it. Also the writing style is very pleasant, very simple to read and moves right along. Personally some chapters appealed to me a lot more than others. For example chapters on the iPhone, iTunes, Apple Stores and maybe a bit surprisingly, John Scully. A few others that got far deeper into the science and technology aspects of the various Apple products were interesting and frankly were not that dense but not my personal favorites. This is an outstanding book. You could read it as a super biography of a very interesting impactful man; you could read it as a “how to” management book; you could read it as a book on brilliant branding, encompassing design, retail, communications, products etc; or as a book on political intrigue and corporate power politics; or even as a “family saga”. Or you could read it as all of those and have a great time. As you read through it there will be times you will be nodding up and down saying “of course I knew that” and at other times you will be quite dumbfounded and go “Wow, so that’s why they did that”. You will not be bored and you will definitely come away with a much better understanding of the whole Apple phenomenon, and somewhat sadly, you will probably come away with a feeling that Jobs may well have been a brilliant man (clearly he

was) but might not have been a particularly nice guy (which clearly he wasn't). You should read it.

2. *The Keeper of Lost Causes* by Jussi Adler-Olsen

Yes, another Scandinavian on the loose. This time we venture to Copenhagen, Denmark for what promises to be the first in a series of three books all featuring deeply flawed (isn't just everyone in law enforcement in Scandinavia "deeply flawed"), Chief Detective Karl Mørck who as the flyleaf says "used to be a good homicide detective – one of Copenhagen's best. Then a bullet almost took his life. Two of his colleagues weren't so lucky and Karl, who didn't draw his weapon, blames himself". In any event, Karl is now assigned to what would be in American terminology the "Cold Case" squad. In effect he has been dumped from the ranks of the mighty in the police department. He winds up being assigned an assistant named Assad and things start to pick up in interesting ways. Quite literally I think these two guys could become a pairing in mystery literature not unlike Spenser and Hawk, Doc Ford and Tomlinson, Myron Bolitar and Wyn Lockwood III etc., etc. I am getting a bit ahead of myself here and I'm certainly getting ahead of good old Jussi but I do think its got that kind of potential. Quite simply this is a terrific book. Interestingly it came to my attention through Paige in San Francisco and Jimmy on the beaches of Nicaragua. Yes, it is indeed a rather small world when you think two people as far apart as those two turn up a guy writing in Copenhagen. Who knew? In any event the plot's all about a politician who vanished in Denmark about five years earlier and has been long given up for dead. The question is, is she really? And how, and why? Great writing and a very, very enjoyable read. Way up at the top of the Scandinavian crowd.

3. *The Hypnotist* by Lars Kepler

Now normally I don't write about books in these letters unless I really think they are terrific and would be enjoyed by my friends. But I think it's time to hoist a red flag on the growing notion that seemingly anyone writing a mystery novel in Sweden, let alone in Scandinavia, is automatically brilliant and top of the class. How many times have you read "the clear heir to Stieg Larsson". This book has indeed been a huge success on best seller lists all across Europe and even on the endlessly correct *New York Times*. However, in my view, enough is enough. We start out in the "frigid clime of Tumba, Sweden", where we immediately confront a gruesome "triple homicide" where the only surviving witness is a young boy. From here we move onto any number of psychiatrists, one of whom uses hypnotism as a way to get to the bottom of things and we then cavort from seemingly one hospital/mental institution to another, all the while being "entertained" by some nutcake slashing people to death from one end of Sweden to the other. All under the endlessly "gloomy", "grey", "dreary", "wet" etc., etc., skies of Sweden. Give me a break! I actually have some great friends in Sweden who do not go about slashing people. They're really a lot of fun. I think maybe it's time for Swedish writers to recognize that that part of the population exists. Maybe I'm just cranky today, but this book did irritate me. And by the way "Lars Kepler" is the pen name of a "literary couple" who live in Sweden. Big whoop! (Probably not the best holiday gift).

4. *Zoo Station* by David Downing

I actually bought this book about four years ago. And for one reason or another kept circling it without picking it up. At last I did and I am delighted to have done so. This is a terrific read. It brilliantly brings to life 1939 Berlin as well as parts of Eastern Europe. It is reminiscent of Alan Furst, but frankly I think, better. It features an Anglo-American journalist, John Russell, who “has a German ex-wife and an 11 year old son and also a long time girl friend, a beautiful German starlet”. He writes human interest pieces for British and American newspapers and ultimately gets co-opted into being, while not a spy, “someone of interest” to the Soviets, the British, the Americans and of course the Germans (the Nazis). There is a great plot and I promise you, you will not be putting the book down during the last thirty pages. But the real strength of this book, and its appeal to me, is the way it absolutely brings to life a tremendously interesting period in history and at the same time “educates” in a totally painless way about the maneuvers of that time by the superpowers. I think this is a pretty special book. And the good news is while I have not gotten them as yet, there are a number of other “Station” books, which follow on this one. But this certainly can be a stand alone read. If you at all like this era, this is a must.

5. *The Remnant* by Christy Kenneally

Every bookletter has to have at least one “wild card” and this is it for this one. Kenneally is very well known in Ireland where he is both a published poet, a television host and a retired Catholic Priest. The “objective” *Irish Independent* newspaper refers to this book as a “fast paced thriller, a bit like reading Robert Ludlum crossed with J.M. Synge”. Not a book for everyone, but definitely a worthy read. Plot revolves around the fact that as the Pope is dying, a hard core group of conservatives in the Catholic Church have determined whom they would like to be the next Pope and have systematically set out to “eliminate” any potential threats to that, i.e., they are killing quite a few people. Into the breach steps “Irish born Father Michael Flaherty, a former U.S. Marine, currently based in upstate New York”. You can immediately see where this is going. Father Flaherty, (think Mitch Rapp in a Roman collar) works closely with a New York City detective pal of his, to say nothing of the Cardinal of New York, and starts to sort things out. It is an extremely well written, interesting book. And while there are bits and pieces that do stretch the imagination, you could see it happening.

So much for the “new” guys. How about some of our old reliables, who have hit some new ones out of the park:

6. *The Cut* by George Pelecanos

It’s been a while since we wrote about a Pelecanos book. Mainly since he hasn’t been publishing books because he’s been doing other things such as being the lead writer on “The Wire”, a show often considered the single best series on television ever. The great news is he has started a new series featuring Spero Lucas, an Iraqi war veteran, living in Washington D.C. (where nearly all of Pelecanos’ books take place). Spero has set up a business that is not unlike that of Travis McGee, (the younger of you maybe scratching your heads saying

“who is Travis McGee”. Well, he is one of the best characters in all “mystery” fiction invented by John D. MacDonald back in the early 1960’s. Travis McGee lived on a houseboat named “the Busted Flush” docked in the Bahia Mar marina in Fort Lauderdale. His “business” was “finding stuff you lost”. And his fee would generally be 50% of the value. And by “lost” it often meant it was stolen from you, wrongly distributed in a divorce, who knows what. A fabulous series by the way if anybody has not read any of them.) So that indeed is what Spero does here in current day Washington D.C. -- he recovers stolen property “no questions asked” as long as he gets his cut – 40%. The plot revolves around Lucas being hired by a high profile crime boss to find out who’s been stealing from his operation, principally marijuana. Few people are as good as Pelecanos at bringing to life the “street” of D.C., both in language, music, food, just about everything. He has an ability to turn a phrase, to capture language, to observe on current day Washington D.C. (you can just imagine those thoughts) all the while rapidly moving you along in a genuinely riveting story. He really is one of the very, very best. And this start of a new series is terrific news to all of us who enjoy a good mystery read. Some of you have occasionally indicated that when I talk about authors who have written quite literally a dozen books, “where do I start?” For anyone who’s not read any Pelecanos this is a spectacularly worthy first book to read. There’s no background needed and it is just superb.

7. *Coup d’Etat* by Ben Coes

I hope many of you read and enjoyed *Power Down*. I thought it was just one of the best “thrillers” I’ve ever read, featuring Dewey Andreas, the Mitch Rapp like ex-Seal who can essentially kill you with any digit. You don’t have to have read *Power Down* to enjoy *Coup d’Etat*. Not at all. This is on its own merits, just another great, great read. One of the things Coes is able to do is establish a pretty far out scenario with amazingly simple and rapid credibility. Specifically, the first several pages are all about nuclear warfare erupting between Pakistan and India. Seems impossible to happen – read these first few pages and you may have a different opinion. The rest of the plot of course involves the U.S. Government reaching out to Dewey Andreas to get into the fascinating area of Kashmir and resolving this fairly global crisis. I’m not doing justice here to this book. It is a page turner of the first order, and has as an added virtue, the ability to educate the reader a lot about what underlies so many of the issues today in the troubled area of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. But most importantly this is about a great character, barreling through mayhem, all the while leaving his own brand of same very much in evidence. As always, lots of Washington D.C. intrigue married with on the ground action. I genuinely think these are terrific, right up there with Vince Flynn and Mitch Rapp.

8. *Thirteen Million Dollar Pop* by David Levien

This is the third in a series of outstanding crime novels by Levien, all featuring Frank Behr, the “explosive former cop” now working for the “Caro Group, a high end investigation company in Indianapolis”. Yes these three novels all take place in Indianapolis. And, it turns out there’s a lot more to that place than most of us thought. The first two books in this series were *Where the Dead Lay*, and *City of the Sun*. This is a great little grouping of books for those of you who don’t want to deal with a series of 15 or 18 novels but rather hunker down with three. You will love this guy. He has all the personal baggage one would expect, his divorce, his girlfriend Susan eight months pregnant, and his own private detective

business not doing all that well. Writers like Lee Child, Robert Crais, Harlen Coban all rate Levien extremely highly. Further evidence of his writing ability is that he was one of the key writers on screen plays for *Oceans 13*, *Runaway Jury* and *Rounders*. The story line here basically has Frank Behr “body guarding” Bernie Koldodnik a business mogul moving into big time Indiana politics, and on the verge of being nominated to fill a recently vacated U.S. Senate seat. Politics, money, crooked real estate brokers (gasp), power seekers, and a hired assassin collide with Frank at the middle of this. Lots of cool turns of phrase, and excellent dialogue. A really excellent trio of books.

9. *Stolen Souls* by Stewart Neville

Hopefully you remember Neville as the author of the brilliant *The Ghosts of Belfast*, and the almost equally brilliant *Collusion*. This is the third novel by Neville, whom I think is very rapidly becoming one of the best crime writers in the world. His venue is Northern Ireland, yet his books are not “typical” Northern Irish stuff. The connection between this and the prior two books is relatively loose, and in fact is pretty much independent of them. It does feature Detective Inspector Jack Lennon. This one is all about sex trafficking from Eastern Europe across Western Europe into Northern Ireland and on from there. Neville’s great ability is to bring scenes and situations to vivid life and he does that spectacularly well here. He is just quite simply a superb writer. The storyline starts with a young woman, Galya Petrova who travels to Ireland with the anticipation of working for a nice Russian family teaching them English. She is quickly dragged a world of modern slavery, sold to a Belfast brothel, and on we go from there. How she gets out of there and what mayhem this causes among various Northern Irish gangs, Russian gangs, and of course the Belfast police is the plot of the book. Some very bad dudes, some great dialogue and a great sense of place. If you like Neville, you should read this one. If you haven’t tried Neville, I would go for the “*Ghosts*” first just because I think it is one of the great books of the past many years.

10. *Feast Day of Fools* by James Lee Burke

It’s been a while since there’s been a book by Burke in this letter. Some people love James Lee, some really don’t. I probably fall in the former category and this is a particularly good new book by Burke. It is the fifth in the series featuring Sherriff Hackberry Holland, who patrols a small Southwest Texas border town. (Far removed from Burke’s normal territory of Bayou Teche in Louisiana with Dave Robicheaux). This series featuring Holland, is very much “border town Texas”, and somewhat predictably prominently features the huge issue of illegal immigration and all the crimes that flow from that. Some great characters in this one including Anton Ling “a regal mysterious Chinese woman whom the locals refer to as La Magdalena who is known for sheltering illegals”. Some very bad fellows surface in this rather long novel, but if you at all like Burke this I think is one of his best of late. And of course if you don’t like Burke I doubt you will enjoy this one.

11. *Fun and Games* by Duane Swerczynski

“This is the first of three explosive pulp thrillers from cult crime fiction sensation and Marvel Comics scribe Duane Swerczynski”. You may remember Swerczynski from several years ago when he wrote two outstanding crime thrillers, *The Wheel Man* and *The Blonde*. Both books took place in Philadelphia where he lives and which is the scene of most of his writing. This

one, *Fun and Games*, actually takes place in L.A. and most particularly in Beverly Hills. It features Charlie Hardie, an ex-cop from Philadelphia who is still reeling from the revenge killing of his former partners' entire family. He has in effect packed it in, both in Philadelphia and the Philadelphia PD and has moved on "languishing in self imposed exile" as a glorified house sitter. He winds up sitting for an entertainment mogul in the hills above LA and therein encounters an "illegally squatting B movie actress who rants about hit-men who specialize in making deaths look like accidents". Unfortunately she speaks reality. Some great dialogue, some great sending up of the "industry" and some pretty thrilling scenes. Very realistic. Charlie Hardie is going to become a very popular ongoing character. Swerczynski is a spectacularly good writer who is a quirky character himself (after all he does live in Philadelphia) and this new series of three books is, going to move him way up the list of hot crime writers. (You know I like this because it's only available in paperback and I actually bought it and read it. And I have the next two waiting for me).

12. *Zero Day* by David Baldacci

Yep, that Baldacci, frankly I'd given up on him since he seemed to be cranking out books at a feverish pace and candidly they were getting pretty repetitious. This is the launch of a new series and it is excellent. It features John Puller who is a combat veteran and is "the best military investigator in the US Army's Criminal Investigative Division". Puller is "called out on a case in a remote rural area in Western Virginia coal country far from any military outpost". A brutal crime scene involving the homicide of a family of four, the father of whom was an active duty Colonel in the US Army. This is old school Baldacci, a thriller with an ability to bring to life a place that most of us have not visited, namely small town, backwoods strip mining West Virginia. Lots of interaction between our Army investigator and the local small town deputy sheriff, young Samantha Cole. If you're a Baldacci fan or frankly if you were, this would be a great book with which to reconnect to him. It operates at a high level throughout with his very easy to read, fast moving writing style. It gets a little bit less than credible towards the end but generally holds up. I do think he's got a great lead character now for future books and there are unique twists to him that make this not "run of the mill". Far from it.

13. *The Litigators* by John Grisham

Yes, I am slipping back to authors of days gone by, guys who've suffered by becoming overly popular and overly "productive". They seem to be cranking out books at too rapid a rate all of which seem to be clones of each other. This one is not. Yes it's all about legal stuff but it has laugh out loud moments and brilliantly sends up all aspects of the legal profession. The setting is Chicago, and the key characters are Messrs. Finley and Figg who are legal bottom feeders, operating a "boutique law firm" which really means there's only the two of them with an assistant. And they specialize in chasing ambulances, hustling people in hospitals etc. Into their midst stumbles, quite literally David Zinc a young but already burnt out attorney who is bolting from his fast track fancy downtown law firm. When these worlds collide it makes for a really entertaining read in a very typical Grisham style. Easy to read, fun to read, several laugh out loud moments and yet at the same time lots of pretty heavy duty "legal stuff". My own experience was I loved the first third of the book, I loved the last third of the book but the middle third got a little heavy as we plodded through the legalities of a mass negligence law suit against "big Pharma". But he does make court room scenes

and "the law" come to life in a pretty easy to absorb way. I actually think this is going to make a great movie some day. If you're at all a Grisham fan I think you will love this one. And even if you're not, if you do like courtroom dramas, send ups of various "institutions" in this country and particularly in Chicago, this is a nice, frothy, fluffball to read over the Holidays.

Hopefully you're still with me. And hopefully you found a couple here that you might like to "gift" over the holidays – perhaps even to the most deserving person, namely yourself. I promise to not write another letter in 2011 and for now have a Merry Christmas, a Happy Chanukah, a Happy Holiday or just a simple day off -- whatever works for you.

Enjoy. All the best,

*Brendan*