

brendanryan9@gmail.com

December 14, 2021

Greetings, Book Pals,

As Flounder famously said 43 years ago in the great movie, *Animal House*, “Boy, is this great!”

And “great” refers to the books that I’m about to recommend to you following my last four months of reading. Some absolutely great new one-offs from new authors, to a superb new series, to some outstanding offerings from long-standing favorites, to some nonfiction and even a book written by a dog that is just brilliant.

Now, a number of “subscribers” (do remember the massive charge for this letter) have mumbled across the internet comments like “where the hell is my bookletter?” Hmm, my only excuse, aside from, I guess, increasing lassitude as I toddle into seniordom is that I’ve just been too damn busy reading.

In any event, hope you’ve all been well and are successfully dodging all sorts of mutations and are ready for terrific reading. And with that...herewith...The books.

1. James Kestrel

– Five Decembers

No less an author than Dennis Lehane comments in a cover blurb, “a crime epic for the ages.” And guess what? It is. This is just an absolutely great book. It begins in Honolulu, November 26, 1941 and spans the next five Decembers. Now I freely admit that I have long been uniquely fascinated by World War II in the Pacific both from a historic standpoint and a personal standpoint...always a location of great fiction. And like any great book, it features excellent writing, fascinating locations brought incredibly accurately to life ... places like Honolulu at the time of Pearl Harbor, Hong Kong in the first year of the War and then several years in Tokyo during the War. Plus an extraordinary collection of intriguing characters, some real, some fictional.

Let me quote the propaganda on the cover of the book ...“An extraordinary novel so much more than just a gripping crime story (and it is that) – a story of survival against all odds, of love and loss and the human cost of war. Spans the entirety of World War II in the Pacific.” I

suspect I'm not doing this justice. It is absolutely a must-read book. No matter what your fascination, yeah- it's a mystery. Yeah – it's a violent murder, Yeah-there's romance, Yeah-there's history, Yeah- there's great writing. What the hell else do you need? Just a gem. And surprisingly, I haven't read a lot about it. Do not miss this one. Curiously it's published by Hard Case Crime and therefore has the predictable, rather lurid cover that could send you in a different direction. Great read. MUST READ

2. Colson Whitehead

--Harlem Shuffle

I'm sure many of you are well aware of Colson Whitehead. Two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, winner of The National Book Award, etc. etc. Frankly, winners of prizes tend not to be authors of books that I very much enjoy. This book completely contradicts that point of view. The setting is a beautifully recreated New York City of the early 1960's (I was here and it rings true) and the story is described as a "gloriously entertaining novel of heists, shakedowns and rip-offs set in Harlem in the 1960's". All true. The lead character is Ray Carney, brilliantly described as "only slightly bent when it came to being crooked." (LUV that). Ray has established a life running a reasonably priced furniture store on 125th Street in Harlem where he is known to nearly all his customers as that fine upstanding fellow who is "making something of himself." Few know that he descends from a line of uptown hoods and crooks and that his façade of normalcy has more than a few cracks in it.

Things are proceeding just fine for Ray and his wife, now pregnant with their second child when as they say, "opportunity knocks." A "crew" is being assembled to rob the Hotel Theresa (a real hotel and generally thought of as the Waldorf Astoria of Harlem and to put it mildly, not an easy knock-off). Ray struggles to remain the good guy but is eager to benefit as the bad guy. We come in contact with an amazing array of characters in a place and time brought to life in an absolutely fascinating and extremely easy to read way. Whitehead is clearly a darling of the literary set but despite that, he writes a great mystery novel, a great crime novel, a great family novel and in its own way, an historical novel of a wonderfully interesting time and place.

3. Bill Bratton

--The Profession

Yup, that Bill Bratton. The same guy who was Police Commissioner in Boston, in New York City, in Los Angeles and then again in New York City. And no, this is not fiction. Although some parts of it, you would think were. But what it really is, as the flyleaf says, is "A searching examination of the path of policing over the past 50 years, for good and for ill. A master class in transformative leadership." Perhaps a little pompous that, but if you are at all interested in what's been going in criminal justice and policing over the past many years and you really do

want to read this book. But I will confess that while it looks a little daunting particularly with the subtitle on the front cover of “A memoir of community, race, and the art of policing in America”, it actually is an extremely readable book. And totally suited for those laypeople among us who don’t come with degrees in criminal justice or even the law, but rather simply are people who like to live in a city that accords us safety, security, and a nice way of life. And Bill Bratton knows how to get there. I honestly just wish more of our politicians of both political stripes on a national, state and particularly local level would read this book. It really does lay it all out there pretty clearly and does so in a highly readable manner and an entertaining manner that caused it to be included in this booklet.

4. Jacqueline Winspear *--Maisie Dobbs*
5. _____ *--Birds of a Feather*
6. _____ *--Pardonable Lies*
7. _____ *--Messenger of Truth*
8. _____ *--An Incomplete Revenge*
9. _____ *--Among the Mad*
10. _____ *--The Mapping of Love and Death*
11. _____ *--A Lesson in Secrets*

OMG...He’s lost his mind again. Well actually, yes I have. And to those who occasionally accuse me of being obsessed with “boy books” this should serve as strong counterpoint. Whether this is a manifestation of my feminine side bubbling to the fore, doesn’t really matter. This is just a great series recommended to me by our West Coast Manager, Paige after she roared through the ten books of Susan Hill and needed a follow-up. For whatever reason, I was unaware of Ms. Winspear. It turns out she has about 17 in this continuing series of which I’ve read about half.

The lead character is Maisie Dobbs. And a brilliant character she is and she carries the series all the way through to what I think is the 17th volume. In volume One, titled *Maisie Dobbs* we meet Maisie in a flashback to when she was 13 years old as she “entered service” into the “home” of Lord Julian and Lady Rowan Compton .We follow Maisie as she performs her tasks as

a maid but we also observe that she is an extremely bright young woman who "finds" the family library. Which she then frequents most mornings on her off hours between 2-4am. She is "discovered" and all the right things happen, and she is sent on to college, highly unlikely for a woman of her background. She does well, becomes a nurse, takes a leave from college, serves on the front lines in France, suffers the horrors of World War I, returns from that experience and ultimately becomes a private investigator and psychiatrist against all odds. (Talk about a rapid condensation of a story.)

With all that we then follow Maisie through each succeeding volume as she establishes herself as a private detective and a psychiatrist, builds a relationship with Scotland Yard, grieves for her lost lover from World War I and then, all very much in the matter of *Foyles War*, each successive volume in effect, tracks with what was happening in England and Europe during the late 1920's and then almost year by year in the 30's. History plays a key rolethe desperate circumstances of so many in London in the 30's coming across loud and clear in counterpoint to the "upper class" friendships and connections Maisie has made through the Compton family that first "gave her chance".

Several of the early titles involve "cases" that tail back to The Great War – missing sons, stolen valuables, etc. And then as time moves on into the 30's, world politics, including Germany, and a nascent Hitler enter the stories. I've just reached the point in volume eight, *A Lesson in Secrets*, where Winston Churchill has appeared as a character and Maisie's role seems to be shifting away from being a private investigator and more into the realm of espionage.

I do hope this writeup piques your interest. These books feature an extraordinarily fascinating woman, written by a massively talented female author, about an under, understood period of history that is brought to life on every level in an amazing clear articulate, engaging way. The politics, the economic hardships, the class distinctions, the role of women, etc. etc. all entwined with a great and continuing collection of characters....and did I mention, each title has a standalone "story", that is most easy to read. These ain't "history textbooks". Without doubt, one of the most addictive series I've ever gotten sucked into. And boy is this not one that would normally automatically be at the top of the Brendan Ryan reading list.

One last comment. (I know, I know.. enough already.) One other aspect that makes this series "different" is the extensive amount of time given over to the description of outfits worn by women who pass through the scene. For example, highly unlikely to read a paragraph like this from Rankin, Connelly, Flynn, Estleman, etc.... "Maisie noted the quality of the woman's deep burgundy gabardine suit, and the soft leather gloves and felt hat chosen to complement the expensive ensemble precisely. Her shoes had clearly been chosen with care as well for they were a fine burgundy leather with half straps at each side that met in the center and were

secured with a grosgrain ribbon tied in a small bow. Maisie was intrigued by the bow for it suggested a certain girlishness, as if the woman could not quite accommodate the maturity that her age suggested.” Well now, there’s a Brendan Ryan paragraph if I ever read one. NOT !

12. Chick Donohue & J.T. Molloy The Greatest Beer Run Ever

Let me just start by saying I don’t think there’s a neighborhood in the world other than Inwood in Upper Manhattan where during the Vietnam War a bunch of guys would be standing around a bar, drinking beer. And out of the blue, the bartender calls to mind some missing buddies who are serving on active duty in Vietnam. And then says, without batting an eyelash, “wouldn’t it be nice if someone brought them some local beers”. (Excuse me ? – some civilian from here just head over to Vietnam in the middle of the war and to say “hello” and hand over some fresh beers????). Well, actually YES and one of the guys said, “Yeah, of course I’ll do that” and so begins the adventure which has turned into this book. And it’s all true. And documented.

Chick Donohue, a U.S. Marine Corp Veteran and working at the time as a Merchant Seaman was the guy who literally packed the bag with “American Beers”, put a few things together and heads off to Vietnam. The book tells how he got there, what he did while he was there, and how he got back in one piece. It is just a total hoot. Definitely well written with fun observations on the passing parade of life during the Vietnam era and a fine testimonial to the human spirit. . And apparently soon to be a “Major Motion Picture.”

13. Richard O’Rawe --Northern Heist

I had pretty much sworn off reading any more books about the Northern Ireland, the “Troubles’ etc. etc. until this came along. Truly a great read and a hoot (hmm, two “hoots in a row??) And based in fact, as on December 20th, 2004, almost 27 million pounds were stolen from the Northern Bank in Belfast Ireland....“literally the entire contents of the bank’s vaults disappeared overnight.” That is true....actually happened. BUT, this book is fiction but more than a little bit of knowledge of how a bank heist works comes through. The author, a former IRA operative actually did serve time in prison for bank robbery. But not for this one.

The lead character is truly a delightful lad who goes by the name James “Ructions” O’Hare. Ructions is a highly skilled bank robber and word gets around Belfast that he’s “up to something”. Well, no shortage of people beat a path to his door – The IRA , the RUC , the cops, stray ne’er do wells etc. etc. But no beans are spilled and then the robbery occurs. I won’t spoil the rest. But this is really a terrific book. Lots of inside “heist info.” But also, a real insight into life in Belfast in the early 2000’s as well as a spectacularly charming lead character. I never

thought I'd be writing about a "fun" book about Belfast in this era. But here it is. I highly recommend it. Ever the dour *Guardian* calls it "A rollicking colorful account." And the *Irish Independent* calls it "A cunningly plotted thriller." All true and absolutely worth the read.

And now we move on to new books from authors who have already appeared in bookletters over the past many years:

14. *Amor Towles*

--The Lincoln Highway

And BTW, this lad pronounces his first name A-mor versus Ah-mor. (Who else tells you stuff like this?) Whatever..this guy is a truly brilliant writer. He really is a craftsman. One of my favorite books of all time is his prior book *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Just breathtaking. Read it. And this one's pretty up there as well. A bit of a doorstopper at 576 pages, nonetheless it reads like a dream. And rather than 1930's /'40's Moscow, here we are in Middle America in June 1954. Emmett Watson, our 18 year old hero, is driven home to Nebraska by the warden of the juvenile work farm where he had just served his 15 months for involuntary manslaughter. He intends to pick up his brother, sell the farm and head to California but wait...some unforeseen business. Two other lads from the work farm have stowed away in his car and their plan is to go to New York City. Exactly in the opposite direction. If you at all fondly look back on the 1950's, or by the same token, wish you were old enough to look back on said era, this is the book for you. No vicious murders to solve, no complicated banks to rob, but lots of hopping freight trains, romances, and even the Plaza Hotel. A wonderful adventure as young people wander America from Midwest/Nebraska to the heart of NYC..and more. I found it just a totally engaging , no pressure read. Reminder...the best books are always ones that literally transport you to a different time and place and this one certainly does so to the 1950's.

15. *Vaseem Khan*

--The Dying Day

Okay, now the requisite Indian book. And here we are taken to Bombay in 1950 and our heroine, in her second bookletter appearance is Police Inspector Persis Wadia, a female member of the Police Force who without much help from her peers comes up against a major crime. In this case, one of the world's great treasures, a 600-year-old copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which has been safely stored in India's Asiatic Society for years and years suddenly vanishes. The man who was caring for it, an old British war hero and scholar also disappears. Wassup? Persis, again is working with her "buddy" the rather awkward English forensic scientist Archie Blackfinch on the case. Solving riddles leads them to the solution. Nice simple writing, lots of information about Dante (who knew?) and you get to visit 1950's Bombay. Why not??

16. Boy (Peter Mayle's Dog)

A Dog's Life

If you are a “dog person” you must immediately run, not walk, to get this book. If you are not a “dog person” or as in my case a very recently arrived “dog person” (Think 10 week old puppy, in house two weeks...oy vey) you should still get the book. It really is a little gem. I so wonder why it took me so long to find Peter Mayle. If you’ve been reading the booklet over the last several months, you’ll certainly recognize his name and know that I have touted no shortage of his titles. This one is a bit different, but it is also total fun. It literally is written through the eyes of and mouth of his dog whose name to his (the dog’s)dismay is “Boy”. As he muses about his name, Boy writes “I’d have answered to Heathcliff or Caesar Augustus or Mitterand if it meant home-cooking, civil treatment and stomach massage but they appeared to be pleased with the choice and I’ve been Boy ever since... It’s honest, short, and serviceable. Rather like the better class of dachshund.” That’s a great example of the kind of writing and observations that permeate this book. It really is fun to read. And sends up no shortage of those most worthy of being sent up ... English toffs circulating about the French countryside, French “natives” fulminating about the toffs and on and on we go. And as a bonus, the book is perfectly illustrated with drawings by Edward Koren, who is a well-known dude in his own right. Really so wish I got to meet Peter Mayle... I actually think I did back in London in advertising days but way before he had written all these great books. Unfortunately, he passed away not all that long ago.

16. Richard Osman

The Man Who Died Twice

Hopefully, all of you have read Osman’s debut book titled *The Thursday Murder Club* which I lauded to the sky in a prior booklet. If you haven’t read it you really should. In today’s world of gloom, doom and Omicron , getting lost in the environs of Cooper’s Chase, posh retirement village, is really a treat. Here we carry on with the same collection of charming goofies including Elizabeth (what was she really in her earlier life) Joyce, Lon, Abraham,...all still known as the Thursday Night Murder Club, still meeting regularly and now caught up again in solving a serious crime. Our four septuagenarians (several readers can relate) are jostled from somnolence and are suddenly in the middle of a mess with an old pal of Elizabeth who’s on the lam, accused of stealing lots of diamonds from really bad boys. These books are true gems. You might miss the ice, gloom and gore of some slasher gamboling about the wilds of Sweden, but these are much more in my zone these days. I can’t recommend the two books more highly.

17. Caimh (pronounced “Queueve”) McDonnell

The Quiet Man

No, not the movie with John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara of some 60 years ago. This is the third volume in the trilogy featuring Bunny McGarry who has moved his base of operations from Dublin to, of all places, Nevada. Where he is now in prison in one of the very tight penitentiaries under false pretenses with the purpose of busting someone else out. As the subtitle points out “getting into prison is easy, it’s getting out that’s tricky.” McDonnell himself is a well-known comedian in Dublin and in England and also writes these remarkably funny but great thrillers. To clarify things, the original trilogy was called “The Dublin Trilogy” which predictably took place in Dublin. This book is book three in a second trilogy (yes, our man Caimh seems to be hung up on trilogies) but these are based on McGarry stateside. The first book in this trilogy is “Disaster Inc.” and I would suggest you probably read that one first but not necessary. You don’t have to be Irish to laugh out loud at these books. They really are funny and good.

18. Jonathan Harries

The Carpet Salesman from Baghdad

As always, total transparency... Jonathan is a close pal. We worked together many years at an advertising agency. Despite that and his proximity to yours truly, he does write a really terrific novel. This is the second in the series featuring “Jonathan’s long-ago relatives” who it appears for hundreds of years supported the family by being highly skilled assassins who employed only one weapon...a sica (you can look that up) to affect history by eliminating assorted ne’er do wells. Part of the family code is only those who deserve it get to “taste the sica”. Here we have a long-ago ancestor, Elias Smulian Hasson, summoned from Baghdad to Bombay to take on this assignment for the Maharajah of Kutch.

The action takes place in the late 1850’s and ranges from India to the Middle East and back and forth. The assassins assignment in this case is to find and kill the British Officer responsible for pretty savage behavior against survivors of the great Sepoy Uprising. Enough said on the plot. You should start with the first book which was titled *The Tailor of Riga* and then quickly sashay on to this one. Yeah, he’s my buddy but these are really incredibly well-written, lots of fun and do a brilliant job of transporting us the reader to some rather interesting locations where it would be highly unlikely that any of you have spent a lot of time. You can easily find and order these books on Amazon.

As has become tradition, I shall now rattle off in a very brief manner some wonderful new books by some of our most popular, most long-standing authors. If you need more than the little squibs I shall provide as a public service, you haven't been reading prior letters terribly closely. Hmmm.

19. Michael Connelly

The Dark Hours

Quite honestly, it's impossible to top Connelly. He just keeps chugging along, one book better than the next. And this one is terrific as they all are. Lead character this time is LAPD Detective Renee Ballard who's stuck on the midnight shift, nobody's favorite, and decides to hunt down an pair of serial rapists called "The Midnight Men." Bad, bad boys. Then as things happen Renee connects again with guess who, Harry Bosch, long-time LAPD Detective and now out of LAPD and together off they go. Classic Connelly Los Angeles stuff. Genuinely today's Charles Dickens.

20. Vince Flynn (written by Kyle Mills)

Enemy at the Gates

This is the 21st novel featuring ex-CIA Black Ops Operative Mitch Rapp. Some 14 written by Vince Flynn before he passed away and then Kyle Mills has carried the torch with the next six. This one is right on point. If you're a Rapp fan you will enjoy it.

21. Anthony Horowitz

A Line To Kill

I have totally drunk the Horowitz Kool Aid. Just a brilliant, brilliant guy who wrote all of *Foyles War*, loads of other series and here's the third one in this highly unusual trilogy featuring ex-Detective Inspector Daniel Hawthorn and his sidekick in solving crimes, none other than the author himself, Anthony Horowitz. Here the two wind up on a tiny island called Alderney (real place) and work together to help sort out who has killed a local Grandee. I certainly would go back and read *The Word is Murder* and then *The Sentence is Death* prior to reading this one.

22. Ben Coes

The Island

Ben is back which means his great continuing character Dewey Andreas, yes one of those guys who can kill you with any single digit, returns for his ninth novel. These are definitely pure escapism, but I enjoy reading them as most people do. After years of planning Iran intends to take over Manhattan Island and kill the President of the United States as he is giving a speech at the United Nations. Well okay now, a reasonably modest goal. And curiously enough only one man can stop this mess. I wonder who. Truthfully, I approached this with some skepticism (duh) but as it happens this really was a credible, very authentic New York story. I totally enjoyed it. .

Seriously, now it seems we must have a Banville in every bookletter. And it does appear John has abandoned his pseudonym , Benjamin Black and now authors even this Quirke series under his real, Booker prize winning name . Whatever . The good news is the setting is San Sebastian, Spain. Quirke has gone there to relax and generally mess about but whom does he spot but a young woman, April Latimer (hence the title) who was murdered by her brother in Dublin many years ago. Aha! What to do? I mean you have to like Banville's writing.. he's one of the best in the world. So we have an enjoyable mystery novel which brings together some engaging characters from Dublin and makes the resort of San Sebastian come totally alive. I don't think Banville is the best mystery writer in the universe but a worthy "divertissement".

TELEVISION SUGGESTIONS:

Once again, I'm a little thin on the television recommendations. Candidly, more due to the fact that I have been reading like a loon and these days find it hard to both read and watch tv at the same time. These reasonably complicated films on Netflix, Acorn, etc. many with subtitles no less, truly make it impossible to multi-task. With that notwithstanding here are a few suggestions.

1. Succession

As you know my normal rule is to not write about things I don't love. I don't love *Succession*. In fact, I don't like it. I actually hate the characters in it which is why I don't like it. However, having said that I have concluded I am the only person in my broad sphere of friends, family and even distant acquaintances who does not love it. I'm therefore obligated to suggest you all watch it. It features one of the more dysfunctional families on the planet most of whom are fairly odious in my book. My reaction to *Succession* is not unlike my reaction to the infamous but hugely popular novel, *Gone Girl* of some years ago. Again, a miserable collection of folk populated that novel. (Glad I got that off my chest.).

2. Prime Suspect

Yes, that "Prime Suspect". And yes, that Helen Mirren. As this was filmed back in 1991 this would be "young" Helen Mirren. And probably had a lot to do with her becoming the star she has become. But any Helen Mirren is just fine with me and her presence guarantees a quality viewing experience. These five seasons starting in 1991 featured Helen Mirren as Detective Chief Inspector Jane Kennison. It is actually intriguing to view this program today given that it

was filmed 30 years ago, and boy were times different then. She really is brilliant in this role as the first female Chief Inspector in London's Metropolitan Police Force. The things she had to deal with, the social environment, and even the wardrobe is fascinating. It was a hugely popular show back in the UK at that time and for my money has aged very well. As has Helen. (calm down). I believe I watched this show on Brit Box, but I think it's available elsewhere. Beware that there is a later show called, I believe, *Prime Suspect Kennison* and features another whole cast entirely. Maybe good maybe not. I haven't watched it. But this one is just a tremendous goodie with lots of different stories that generally come to a conclusion after an episode or two as opposed to having to wait five years to see the bad guy actually get his comeuppance.

3. Halston

This is a documentary that "captures the epic sweep of the life and times of legendary designer Roy Halston Frowick." I love this film because it brought back to life some times and memories of the 1970's that I certainly personally experienced. Even if from afar. Tons of archival footage, interviews with Halston's pals and collaborators, predictable visits to Studio 54, etc. etc. It's about two hours long, I think it's on Amazon but also Netflix. Beware there is a "movie" floating about with the same name with actors and so on. I watched the documentary, much more fun.

I apologize for the relative paucity of television recommendations...candidly, I've just been reading too damn much. Having a great time doing so. In any event, that's it for now. I really do hope you dig into at least a few of these books. There are some true gems on this list. And regardless, I do hope you all have a very happy, healthy Christmas and Holiday season and may 2022 finally allow us to somehow return to "normal", whatever that is these days.

And as always would appreciate a little bounce-back that you actually received this gem.

Brendan