

# The Daily Telegraph

## A criminally good year

*From a Hollywood fixer to an urchin-turned-spy, 2017's best thrillers reinvented the anti-hero. By Jake Kerridge*

**N**ot since Sherlock Holmes clambered back up the Reichenbach Falls has the resurrection of a seemingly defunct character been so eagerly anticipated. In **A Legacy of Spies** (Penguin, £20) John le Carré has re-entered the secret world of George Smiley after a quarter-century's absence. Narrated by Peter Guillam, a patrician, authority-baiting octogenarian (where does le Carré get his ideas from?), it starts like a dream but feels by the end like a superfluous commentary on his early masterpieces, books that still speak magnificently for themselves.

Among the old friends namechecked is Connie Sachs, who Clive James once naughtily suggested was one of "le Carré's most inspired creations, since she makes any secretary who buys his books think that there is something really dangerous and romantic about filing". It is certainly true that we readers like even the most melodramatic thriller to have some point of relatability to our own humdrum lives, which is perhaps why Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* was so phenomenally popular with the millions of commuters who daydream about what they see out of the window.

Hawkins's follow-up, **Into the Water** (Doubleday, £20) is less ingratiating in this respect and many others, describing from a dozen different viewpoints the effect of a series of violent deaths on a Northumbrian village. It may be less easy to warm to than *The Girl on the Train*, but I think it is a better book. Like *Into the Water*, Jane Harper's **The Dry** (Little, Brown, £8.99) has a protagonist returning from a self-imposed exile to a tiny hometown riven with fear, though the backdrop here is the drought-plagued Australian outback. Harper depicts it so well that the book would have reduced me to a sweaty, crumpled heap on the floor had I not been energised by her diabolically clever plotting.

*The Dry* was a good pick for this year's Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger, but I would have given the prize to Denise Mina's **The Long Drop** (Harvill Secker, £12.99), a study of the serial killer Peter Manuel, who was hanged in Glasgow in 1958. If, while wishing Ian Brady or Charles Manson a sincere good riddance, you found yourself wondering what it would be like to experience their sulphurous charisma in person, Mina's version of Manuel is probably the closest you can get. When I finished it I wanted

simultaneously to burn it and to buy copies for everybody I know.

Almost as good is Erin Kelly's **He Said/She Said** (Hodder & Stoughton, £12.99), which details the terrifying consequences for a young couple who witness a sexual assault. It has been suggested that there are so many great female crime writers because women can channel the fear that (it becomes increasingly apparent) they live with every day; even so, few write directly about rape. Kelly is to be congratulated on her bravery, and for her heartfelt fielding on *Woman's Hour* of the accusation that her novel exploits the suffering of assault victims. It's a fair question, but I don't often hear it put to, say, male spy novelists who write about terrorist attacks.

Mick Herron's **Spook Street** (John Murray, £7.99), began with an atrocity targeted at teenagers, which seemed horribly prescient come the Manchester Arena attack in May. But it's these discomfiting dips into the real world that give Herron's entertaining series about incompetent MI5 rejects its depth.

In **Defectors** (Simon & Schuster, £14.99), Joseph Kanon examined, with his customary subtlety, the motives of a CIA agent spilling secrets to the KGB. Nicholas Searle drew on his own background in

intelligence to portray an IRA terrorist and his wife forced into different types of betrayal in **A Traitor in the Family** (Penguin, £14.99). But the top espionage yarn is **The Spy's Daughter** (Sphere, £8.99), by Adam Brookes, in which his disgraced spook Philip Mangan gets a shot at redemption when he tries to help a teenage girl evade the clutches of Chinese military intelligence. This completes the Mangan trilogy, a modern spy classic.

The crime novel with the most unusual premise of the year, **You Don't Know Me** (Michael Joseph, £12.99) by Imran Mahmood, a criminal barrister, takes the form of a monologue delivered to a jury over 10 days by a young black man defending himself on a murder charge. It sometimes strains credibility, but it's churlish to ask for perfection from a novel written with so much originality.

Three more debuts introduced splendid anti-heroes. Ali Land's **Good Me, Bad Me** (Penguin, £7.99), told by a serial killer's teenage daughter trying to make a new life for herself, made readers' sympathies flip-flop more often than the Government outlining its social care policy. **The Pictures** by Guy Bolton (Point Blank, £8.99) follows a morally dubious studio fixer in a superbly realised Thirties Hollywood. And Aidan Waits, the troubled Manchester cop who narrates Joseph Knox's **Sirens** (Doubleday, £12.99) is a bad-boy-cum-white-knight in the great tradition of hard-boiled crime.

For those who think crime fiction begins and ends with Sherlock Holmes, this article will do the same. I thoroughly enjoyed HB Lyle's **The Irregular** (Hodder & Stoughton, £17.99), which imagines Wiggins, the street urchin who helps Holmes in Conan Doyle's tales, grown up and working for the real-life spymaster Vernon Kell. And **IQ** by Joe Ide (W&N, £8.99) is a blissfully funny update of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* with an African-American Holmes figure in modern LA. These are two smart, sophisticated books but they will

still appeal to those unrefined readers – like me – who devoured the Holmes stories when we were young, and secretly believe that nothing in life has been as exciting since.