

The Guardian

Thrillers roundup

A follow-up to *The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair*; a kidnapping in the shadow of Al-Qaida; and two British gangsters hit the open road in search of revenge

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The publishing world is no stranger to arguments, but few were as divisive as those prompted by Joël Dicker's multi-award-winning *The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair* two years ago. Admirers claimed it as a masterpiece, with eye-catching metafictional conceits, while detractors dismissed it as banal and overrated. The book sold 2m copies in a year. Its successor, **The Baltimore Boys** (MacLehose, £20, translated by Alison Anderson), is likely to create less of a stir, but may still cause puzzlement. Writer Marcus Goldman, the protagonist of the first book, reappears on a new search for inspiration. This time it takes him to Florida, where an encounter with an old girlfriend makes him look back at golden days with his cousins, the eponymous Baltimore Boys. But the glittering prizes they anticipated in their youth have turned to dust, and Marcus's investigation of a legacy of betrayal and deceit is to have a profound impact on his own life. The new book's continental sales have already been prodigious, but what's most curious is how it replicates the dichotomy of *Harry Quebert*: the reader is never sure whether they are reading an ambitious literary novel or an overblown airport blockbuster in Jeffrey Archer style. Once again, Dicker's astute observations (notably about class divides and politics in the US) coexist with curiously maladroit writing and guidance that seems to belong in a self-help manual.

Readers of Michael Ridpath's corporate thrillers were nonplussed by a recent change of direction into impressive Iceland-set mysteries. **Amnesia** (Corvus, £12.99) demon-

strates that Ridpath has itchy feet again. His latest offering is a stand-alone psychological thriller - and it suggests he may finally have found his metier. Curmudgeonly retired doctor Alistair Cunningham has had a fall that has damaged his memory and is recuperating in a cottage by a Scottish loch; he is reluctantly attended to by Clémence, the great-niece of a friend. She discovers a manuscript in which her patient appears to confess to killing a woman he once loved. But attempting to uncover the truth soon puts both Alistair and Clémence in peril. Using an expertly wrought book-within-a-book narrative and a variety of time shifts to address issues of ageing and memory, Ridpath is in full command of his material.

Fasten your seatbelts: any time spent in the company of Steve Cavanagh's tough-guy lawyer, Eddie Flynn, will guarantee a bumpy ride. **The Liar** (Orion, £17.99) is no exception. Eddie investigates the kidnapping of a rich businessman's daughter. But there is a strange complication: Eddie's client runs an organisation that handles kidnap negotiations with dangerous groups such as Al-Qaida. More might be going on than meets the eye ... Ian Fleming led a vicarious fantasy life through 007; is the unlikely superlawyer, as adept at physical violence as he is in the courtroom, a similar alter ego for Cavanagh, whose day job is practising civil rights law?

With its bullet-riddled jacket and speeding car illustration, **Road Kill** by Hanna Jameson (Head of Zeus, £7.99) announces forcefully that this is no cosy home counties mystery; the author

serves up caustic and energetic fare, with echoes of James Ellroy, in what is essentially a literary road movie smelling of hot American tarmac and cheap motels. Two violent British gangsters search for Trent, an ex-colleague who did the dirty on them. Through its high body count, all the way to a counter-intuitively low-key ending, this is a fast-moving narrative.

The critical stock of Joseph Kanon is high, and **Defectors** (Simon & Schuster, £14.99) will add further lustre to his reputation. The year is 1961. Ex-CIA operative and defector Frank Weeks is about to publish his memoirs; his

betrayal had a seismic effect in Washington, destroying the career of his brother Simon. The latter's journey to Moscow will unearth some Stygian secrets. There are pleasing echoes here of the "entertainments" of Graham Greene.

Of late, Sherlock Holmes pastiches have had an air of desperation, with every character connected with 221B Baker Street dragooned for service, including the great detective's landlady. But HB Lyle's **The Irregular** (Hodder, £17.99) proves that this is still fecund territory, given an unorthodox approach. Wiggins, Holmesians will remember, was the sharpest member of the Baker Street irregulars, the ragamuffin street children enlisted by Holmes. But by 1909, Wiggins is a resourceful ex-soldier, recruited by intelligence man Captain Vernon Kell, who is convinced of a range of dangers facing London. A flavoursome smorgasbord that features not only Holmes but also Winston Churchill, this is irresistible stuff.