

apparently links the killer to an officer of the British forces.

Because of the potential negative fall-out if the killer turns out to be a British serviceman, the military powers aren't in a rush to investigate and they discourage Max from delving further into the mystery. Torn be-

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island, one of whom is married to a fellow officer who may or may not be under suspicion for the crimes. Under a nearly constant barrage of bombs and unsure who he can trust among his colleagues, Max must move cautiously, not only to stay alive, but to protect the women close to him.

As a World War II history buff, I enjoyed learning more about a part of the war with which I wasn't that familiar. But whether you have an interest in that era or not, I think you'll enjoy this exciting and informative novel which is part mystery, part history and part spy thriller.—*Joseph Scarpato, Jr.*

City of Dragons by Kelli Stanley
Minotaur Books, February 2010, \$24.99

Chesterfield-puffing, 22-toting, Miranda Corbie, the heroine of Kelli Stanley's finely realized and unapologetically hard-boiled historical noir, is a welcome blow of secondhand smoke straight into the face of all those squeaky clean amateur sleuths who have flooded bookstore shelves recently. The former "escort" is now a gumshoe in 1940s San Francisco, with an office on the fringes of Chinatown—a place where the Chinese and other Asian communities seek refuge and safety in numbers from the city's dominant white majority who think "can't tell them apart anyway." But it's a fragile peace at best that Chinatown offers thanks to the Japanese invasion of China and the subsequent Nanking Massacre of 1937. The rising political and racial tensions between the communities are threatening to explode. Into this powder keg struts Miranda, simply seeking a shortcut home through the crowded streets where a giant combination Chinese New Year/Rice Bowl Party (to "raise money for war-torn China") is in full steam. Then Eddie Takahashi, a Japanese youth and runner for a local gangster, keels over on the sidewalk right in front of Miranda. In the confusion and firecrackers, it takes

her a moment to realize that this isn't simply a case of someone partying too heartily—the boy has been murdered. Miranda doesn't particularly want to get involved, but when the authorities try to sweep it all under the carpet, she rises to the occasion, not just talking the talk but walking the walk, like the long-lost soul sister of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe.

The period detail seems spot-on and never gratuitous, Miranda's wry observations sharp and to the point, and the political and racial nuances of the era (Miranda's still hurting from the loss of her love in the Spanish Civil War) finely-etched and sympathetically drawn. And yet Stanley never lets her eyes off the prize. Deep down, it's the story that matters, not its setting, and Miranda's search for the truth, if not justice, is one that will reverberate and leave a gritty aftertaste long after the covers have been closed on this one. One of the most convincing and intriguing PI debuts I've read in a while, and certainly the most fully realized historical private eye to come down the pike in a long time. Abbott? Collins? Watch out.—*Kevin Burton Smith*

Death of a Valentine

by M.C. Beaton
Grand Central Publishing, January 2010, \$23.99

Fans of Hamish Macbeth will welcome this latest addition to the series. Set in the hamlet of Lochdubh in Sutherland, the northernmost part of the Western Highlands, it contains the colorful characters, village activities, and delightful scenery and customs that Beaton fans have come to expect. This, the 25th or 26th adventure depending on who's counting, contains a bit more violence than the typical tale. Hamish has been promoted to sergeant, a worry for him since he always fears that promotions will land him in the "Chicago-like" crime-ridden town of Strathbane. He has also been assigned a constable of his own, a young female named Josie McSween, who has fallen in love with him from afar—she saw him one day in Strathbane, but he didn't notice her. Josie daydreams of getting rid of Lugs and Sonsie, the sergeant's beloved pets, and redecorating the police station where he lives.

The story opens with the humorous crimes readers have come to expect, but there is soon the death by letter-bomb of Annie Fleming, the local beauty queen and mantrap. Soon Hamish is trying to solve the crime while dodging Josie's plots to drug and ensnare him. One of her efforts actually saves his life when a hit man drinks Josie's drugged whisky and then fails to kill him. The real mystery here

is whether Hamish can escape the dreadful marriage that the alcoholic Josie has planned for him. Readers owe M.C. Beaton a debt of gratitude for the many hours of enjoyment she has given them in this much loved cozy series.—*Mary Helen Becker*

Phi Beta Murder

by C.S. Challinor
Midnight Ink, March 2010, \$14.95

While visiting his son at a Florida college, Scottish barrister and part-time amateur sleuth Rex Graves is present when the body of his son's classmate is found hanged in a dorm room. Because the door was locked from the inside and instructions for hanging oneself are found downloaded on his computer, everyone assumes it was a suicide. But Rex isn't entirely satisfied. There was no suicide note, and neither the young man's friends nor his girlfriend noticed anything particularly unusual with him that day. After talking to the dead boy's parents, who aren't convinced that their son committed suicide, Rex is asked by them to investigate. Even if he had taken his own life, they want to know why it happened and what drove him to it. Complicating matters, a mentally unstable former girlfriend of Rex's follows him to Florida to try to rekindle their relationship, even though she knows Rex is now committed to someone else.

This is a well-paced mystery that plays fair with the reader and provides a satisfying and surprising conclusion. The writing is crisp and dialogue-driven, as evidenced by its less than 200-page length. *Phi Beta Murder* is the third Rex Graves mystery by C.S. Challinor who, though born in the US, was educated in Scotland and England, and now lives in Florida.—*Joseph Scarpato, Jr.*

Ticket to Ride by Ed Gorman

Pegasus Books, December 2009, \$25.00

For true mystery lovers, little surpasses the pleasurable anticipation of starting the latest book in a favorite series knowing that the next few hours will be happily spent in the company of old friends. Ed Gorman, of the popular Sam McCain books, is one of those authors who rarely disappoints. In *Ticket To Ride*, Gorman gives small-town Iowa lawyer Sam not just one, but two, puzzling murders to tackle.

The time is the mid '60s, America is in cultural turmoil with the British invasion of the Beatles and Stones, and a groundswell of protest against the Vietnam War. Black River Falls is divided between those for and those against the War, with Sam siding with