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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Fed up with that Hallmark good cheer? Escape with a classic mystery.

Classic crime fiction is the perfect way to restore your holiday spirit — and old tales are best, especially when they appear in shiny and inviting new editions

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When all the Hallmark movies, yuletide carols and unrelenting family time begin to wear away your Christmas spirit, it's time to retreat, if only for a few hours, to some quiet corner with a classic murder mystery. There's nothing like a Great Detective, a seemingly impossible crime, an abundance of red herrings and some clever deduction to restore one to jolly, Santa-like bonhomie.

Let me stress that now isn't the time for nail-biting suspense or gritty slices of underworld life: Most modern crime fiction is liable to roil the emotions and leave one feeing drained or upset rather than rested and restored. Old tales are best for winter, especially when they appear in shiny and inviting new editions.

For example, **"The Penguin Book of Murder Mysteries,"** edited with commentary by Michael Sims, offers a selection of little-known whodunits, several of them published long before Sherlock Holmes first appeared in 1887's "A Study in Scarlet." Only a few connoisseurs of crime are likely to have already read "The Hand and Word" by Gerald Griffin, "Negative Evidence" by Richard Dowling, "The Sheriff's Children" by Charles W. Chesnutt or "The Statement of Jared Johnson" by Geraldine Bonner.

In effect, Sims is a kind of literary archaeologist, unearthing half-buried treasure. Consider "Hanged by the Neck: A Confession," by Charles Martel (an obvious pseudonym), first published in 1860. It opens, "I am about to lift the veil of mystery which for ten years has shrouded the murder of Maria G---; and though I lay bare my own weakness, or folly, or what you will, I do not shrink from the unveiling." That Victorian diction is strangely enticing, even if the reason for the murder of a beautiful young dancer in her locked apartment turns out to be very peculiar indeed.

Several female detectives appear in Sims's anthology, notably Loveday Brooke in C.L. Pirkis's "The Murder at Troyte's Hill" and Violet Strange in Anna Katharine Green's "An Intangible Clue." Many others — Dorcas Dene, Lady Molly, Judith Lee — can be found in Sims's "Penguin Book of Victorian Women in Crime," which usefully augments Michele Slung's pioneering "Crime on Her Mind" and the old Ellery Queen anthology "The Female of the Species: The Great Women Detectives and Criminals." But if you are taken with 19th-century storytelling in general, be sure to check out the Westminster Detective Library, the online repository of detective fiction published in magazines during the pre-Sherlockian era. It was co-founded by the late and much-missed LeRoy Lad Panek with its current editor Mary M. Bendel-Simso, both of nearby McDaniel College.

During the heyday of Sherlock Holmes, many British writers created competing versions of the sleuth of Baker Street. But in America the most dazzling pre-World War I detective was Jacques Futrelle's Professor S.F.X. Van Dusen, a.k.a. The Thinking Machine.

Earlier this year, Library of Congress Crime Classics brought out a new selection of Futrelle's stories, chosen and annotated by the series's general editor, Leslie S. Klinger. Despite its uninvitingly anatomical cover, LCCC's **"The Thinking Machine"** offers a week's worth of highly entertaining period pieces and one masterpiece. The latter is, of course, "The Problem of Cell 13," Van Dusen's triumphant demonstration that nothing is beyond the power of the human intellect. To prove this point, the professor allows himself to be confined to a maximum-security prison cell and vows to escape within a week. If you've never read this classic, you're in for a treat.

On the other side of the pond, British Library Crime Classics, overseen by the redoubtable Martin Edwards, continues its own highly successful program of paperback reprints. Having greatly enjoyed Christianna Brand's "Green for Danger" last summer, I settled down a few days ago with the BL paperback of her even more intricate "Death of Jezebel." Written with both humor and pathos, it's set at a British pageant in which 11 knights ride their horses around a tower and pay homage to a beautiful princess, high up on a parapet. During the show, in view of the audience, a horrific murder is committed by one of those knights. But which one? In their armor, they all look alike. Or could it have been someone else entirely?

I don't want to say more about this tour de force, but an analogy may help convey something of its playful complexity: If the main elements of the case are designated with the letters S, P, T and O, should they be arranged to spell TOPS, OPTS, SPOT, POST or STOP? By the climax of "Death of Jezebel," the reader's head will be spinning as Brand presents alternative reconstructions of the murder until Inspector Cockrill, in a melodramatic finale, reveals exactly who did what, why and how.

Brand unquestionably pulls out all the stops for "Death of Jezebel." In a contribution to the online CrimeReads site, Tom Mead — author of "Death and the Conjurer" and "The Murder Wheel" — selected the novel as the third-greatest locked-room mystery, after John Dickson Carr's "The Hollow Man" (a.k.a. "The Three Coffins") and Hake Talbot's "Rim of the Pit." As it happens, American Mystery Classics recently issued a new edition of Talbot's novel, introduced by Rupert Holmes. Set in a snowbound vacation cabin, it blends the murderous with the seemingly supernatural — and just when you think it's over, it isn't.

Because I'd read the Talbot a few years ago, I decided that I'd rather spend a couple of evenings with the new AMC edition of **"The Adventures of Ellery Queen."** Over the years, the imprint has reissued a half-dozen of the early Queen novels, including the notoriously clever "The Chinese Orange Mystery," but only this fall did it get round to what Otto Penzler calls "the finest collection of Golden Age mysteries by an American."

Written in the early 1930s, the 11 stories blend the hothouse artificiality characteristic of S.S. Van Dine's novels featuring his supercilious detective, Philo Vance, with something of the madcap zinginess of "The Thin Man" movies. A dandy with an eye for the ladies and a tendency to self-pity, Ellery Queen is nonetheless as shrewdly observant as Sherlock Holmes or Father Brown.

In "The Bearded Lady," an artist — knowing he is about to be killed — paints a goatee on the woman in his latest picture. Why? I guessed the solution to this one right away, and I suspect you will too, but it's still fun to read. Better still is the book's final and most famous story, "The Adventure of the Mad Tea Party." With clues from Lewis

Carroll's "Alice" novels, it invests a country-house mystery, involving a closed circle of suspects, with an unnervingly absurdist atmosphere.

Crippen & Landru publishes only short-story collections, but it does this exceedingly well. In **"The Killer Everyone Knew,"** Roland Lacourbe assembles the best of Edward D. Hoch's Captain Leopold investigations. Has anybody ever written so many consistently first-rate impossible crime stories as Hoch? If you're already a fan of Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the magus-like Simon Ark or the thief Nick Velvet, you won't want to miss these Captain Leopold puzzlers. They aren't quite as dazzling, to my mind, yet who wouldn't want to kick back with a story titled "The Retired Magician" or "The Mystery That Wouldn't Stay Solved?"

This fall, Crippen & Landru has also published **"School of Hard Knox: Stories That Break Father Ronald Knox's Ten Commandments for Crime Fiction,"** edited by Donna Andrews, Greg Herren and Art Taylor. In 1928 Knox, half facetiously, proposed various "rules" for the authors of mysteries: Avoid the use of twins, deadly gases unknown to science, secret passages, characters who are Chinese and so forth.

But this new anthology undermines all those commandments. For example, in S.J. Rozan's "Chin Yan Yun Goes to Church," an elderly Chinese woman — the mother of Rozan's regular detective Lydia Chin — takes on a larcenous priest named … Father Knox. Sometimes, though, it's hard to determine which rule is being flouted, as in Daniel Stashower's "The Forlorn Penguin." Here the contributor to a mystery magazine conceals breathless love notes to his adulterous beloved in the texts of his Sherlock Holmes pastiches.

I dislike the term "cozies" — it sounds derogatory — but I do gravitate to Old-Time Detection. If you do too, you'll enjoy the excellent magazine of that name edited by Arthur Vidro. One of its regular columnists is no less than John Curran, our greatest authority on Agatha Christie. Devotees of classic sleuthing should also be aware of Tony Medawar's ongoing series "Bodies From the Library: Lost Tales of Mystery and Suspense From the Golden Age of Detection." Volume 6 appeared this fall and features, among much else, work by Christianna Brand, Cyril Hare and Margery Allingham, a Detection Club radio play, and a round-robin thriller with contributions from Geoffrey Household ("Rogue Male") and Dennis Wheatley ("The Devil Rides Out"). Not least, Medawar reprints "Greedy Night," that affectionate parody of Dorothy L. Sayers's Peter Wimsey mysteries, written by her friend E.C. Bentley, author of the immortal "Trent's Last Case."