

Los Angeles Times



Favorite books issue for Dec. 7, 2008

2008 crime fiction favorites

No single theme dominated this year, as the best crime fiction and mysteries ranged across the board

By Sarah Weinman

12:00 AM PST, December 7, 2008

The cream of the crime fiction crop this year runs the gamut from the expected to the eclectic, the dark to the light, the work of stars to that of writers on the verge of making a name for themselves.

Two standout novels don't even qualify as crime fiction exactly, although each revolves around the ramifications of criminal acts. **"Black & White" (Subterranean)**, the first novel in a decade from Lewis Shiner, offers up a fence-swinging array of viewpoints and time periods that merge into a murky shade of contemporary gray. The novel incorporates urban planning, long-buried family secrets and race riots in the black North Carolina enclave of Hayti.

Stewart O'Nan's **"Song From the Missing" (Viking)**, meanwhile, is predicated on the disappearance of a teenage girl, but it steers clear of tabloid lures to delve into the small details; the story rings with quiet emotional truth.

For a strong brew of noir, **"The Finder" (Sarah Crichton/FSG)** is a pungent, high-octane New York story by Colin Harrison, one of the sleekest crime novelists around. Don Winslow drops pitch-perfect sentences to brilliant effect in **"The Dawn Patrol" (Alfred A. Knopf)**, recoding the traditional private-eye novel through a surfer community lens.

In recent years, the mystery has become truly international. Zoë Ferraris' **"Finding Nouf"** (Houghton Mifflin) conveys how Saudi Arabia perceives the United States, revealing this cloistered country's heart and mind. Tom Rob Smith's **"Child 44"** (Grand Central) sets a grisly serial killer saga against the last days of Stalin's regime. It lives up to all of its considerable hype, as does Stieg Larsson's **"The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo"** (Alfred A. Knopf).

The gritty Botswana depicted in Michael Stanley's "A Carrion Death" (Harper) differs from Alexander McCall Smith's gentler vision, but the jovial, corpulent Det. Kubu is a winning creation. And the boom in Irish crime fiction is best represented by Tana French: Her first novel, "In the Woods," won every major mystery award this year, and her follow-up, **"The Likeness"** (Viking) blends lyrical language and a leisurely, labyrinthine plot with even more confidence.

Finally, pick up Leonard Cassuto's **"Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Fiction"** (Columbia University Press), a work of criticism that traces the lineage of hard-boiled writing back to Victorian-era sentimental novels -- finding common ground between tough men who are lambs underneath and cozy women with knitting-needle nerves of steel.

Weinman's Dark Passages column appears monthly at latimes.com/books.