

CRIME & MYSTERY

4 Great Fictional Detectives

The books in this month's column have something in common: unforgettable main characters.

By Sarah Weinman

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You'd think that one of crime fiction's prevailing ideas — that chaos can be transformed into order — would mesh well with explorations of faith. Yet mystery novels that incorporate religion in a significant way aren't all that common. Thankfully, the inspiring Patricia Raybon, a veteran nonfiction writer and novelist, has been threading the needle in just the right way with her Annalee Spain series, set in 1920s Denver.

In the third book, **TRUTH BE TOLD** (Tyndale House, 385 pp., \$29.99), Annalee's deep commitment to her church does not detract from her work as a private detective — in fact, the opposite is true, since she gets plenty of investigative leads from her community. She's attending a garden party at the home of a wealthy Black philanthropist when a young woman turns up dead on the premises, one whom no one is keen to identify.

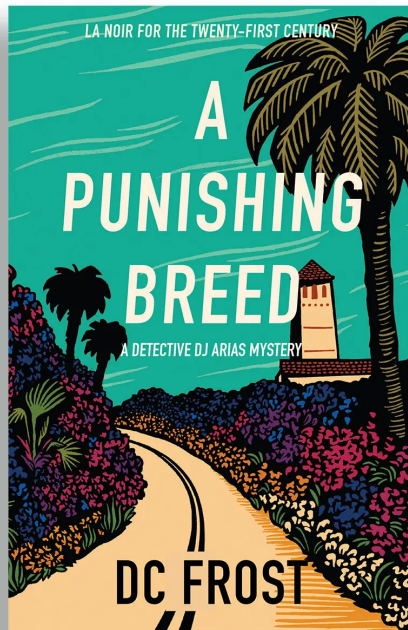
Annalee begins to investigate — not an easy or particularly safe thing for a young Black woman to do in a city controlled by the Ku Klux Klan. Aiding her are church friends; her pastor paramour, Jack Blake; and a young white orphan named Eddie, who “had flat-out saved her life during her ruthless first case.”



Annalee hasn't been a detective long, but she's smart and resourceful, and has figured out a lot about what drives someone to murder: "People kill people — or kill other people's dreams, hopes and spirits, even kill their accomplishments — for fear of losing something themselves."

She's also funny. Finding herself trapped in a dangerous situation, she begins to pray, then worries that God will find her prayer lacking. "But she couldn't ponder that now. Not at a moment like this. Instead she just wanted God to help. *Good grief, Jesus. Please.*"

The campus murder mystery, exemplified by Helen Eustis's "The Horizontal Man" (1946) and the works of Amanda Cross, explores academic grievances turned deadly. I particularly enjoyed one of the latest examples, DC Frost's **A PUNISHING BREED** (Canis Major Books, 313 pp., paperback, \$19.95). In it, Frost introduces the L.A.-based detective DJ Arias, dropping him into an environment that immediately discomfits him: a liberal arts college.



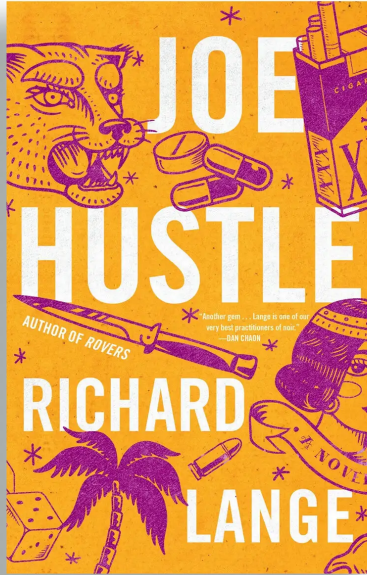
“A homicide at Hesperia College,” Arias thinks when he gets the call. “Not gangbangers shooting each other — the usual cause of death in Eagle Rock — but a bona fide white dude, some vice president, in an office, with a sword in his back. Maybe the butler did it. Or Professor Plum.” Or maybe Danny Mendoza, a gardener at the school, who’s recently been released from prison.

It’d be easy for Arias to focus on Mendoza, but there are plenty of other suspects, including a mysterious caped figure who watches the community and a group of women linked by years of unaddressed crimes.

The best character in the book is a dog named Evidence whom Arias adopts — or is it the other way around?

For years, Richard Lange has quietly climbed into the upper reaches of contemporary American noir. His latest effort, the leanly written **JOE HUSTLE** (Mulholland Books, 255 pp., \$29), solidifies his stature. Joe Hustle — he’s been

called that for so long he barely remembers his real name — is a middle-aged man about to embark on a desperate adventure with no good ending in sight.



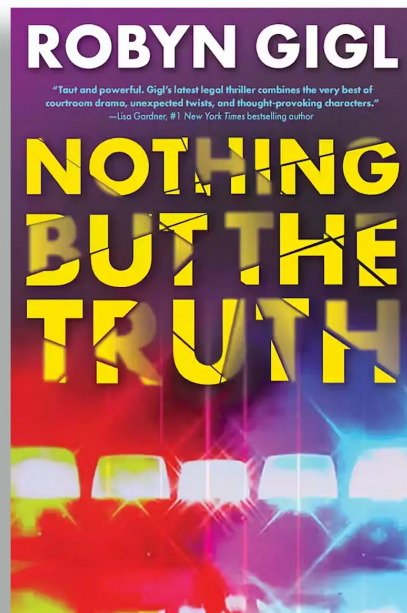
The gulf war gave Joe PTSD and destroyed his desire for a steady career; bartending, construction and under-the-table gigs sustain him from month to month. Joe meets Emily, the sister of a wealthy construction client, and the upward trajectory starts — maybe it'll last this time?

Of course it won't. Running afoul of a drug dealer, Joe and Emily go on a madcap road trip through Vegas and on to Austin, where both reveal their hidden, ugliest selves. Lange juggles the action with snippets of Joe narrating his peripatetic life and what he's survived.

“You ain’t gonna give me trouble, are you?” a bartender asks him after he downs a shot in seconds.

“Ma’am, I’m a professional,” he tells her. “You won’t even know I’m here.”

Erin McCabe, the transgender New Jersey lawyer making her fourth appearance in Robyn Gigl's **NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH** (Kensington, 393 pp., \$28), once again contends with extraordinary circumstances in the courtroom and in her personal life. McCabe and her law partner, Duane Swisher, have taken a difficult case: defending a state trooper accused of murdering a Black investigative reporter, with plenty of physical evidence to link him to the case.



The trooper claims that he was helping the reporter with a story “he believed was the most important of his career”: an investigation into a secret gang of rogue cops called the Lords of Discipline, who have been operating with impunity in New Jersey. “They openly target and falsely arrest minorities,” he tells McCabe and Swisher.

The resulting courtroom fireworks are thrilling, but it’s Erin’s deepening relationships with her friends, family and now-husband, Mark, that make her one of the best series characters around.

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