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BOOKS & PIECES
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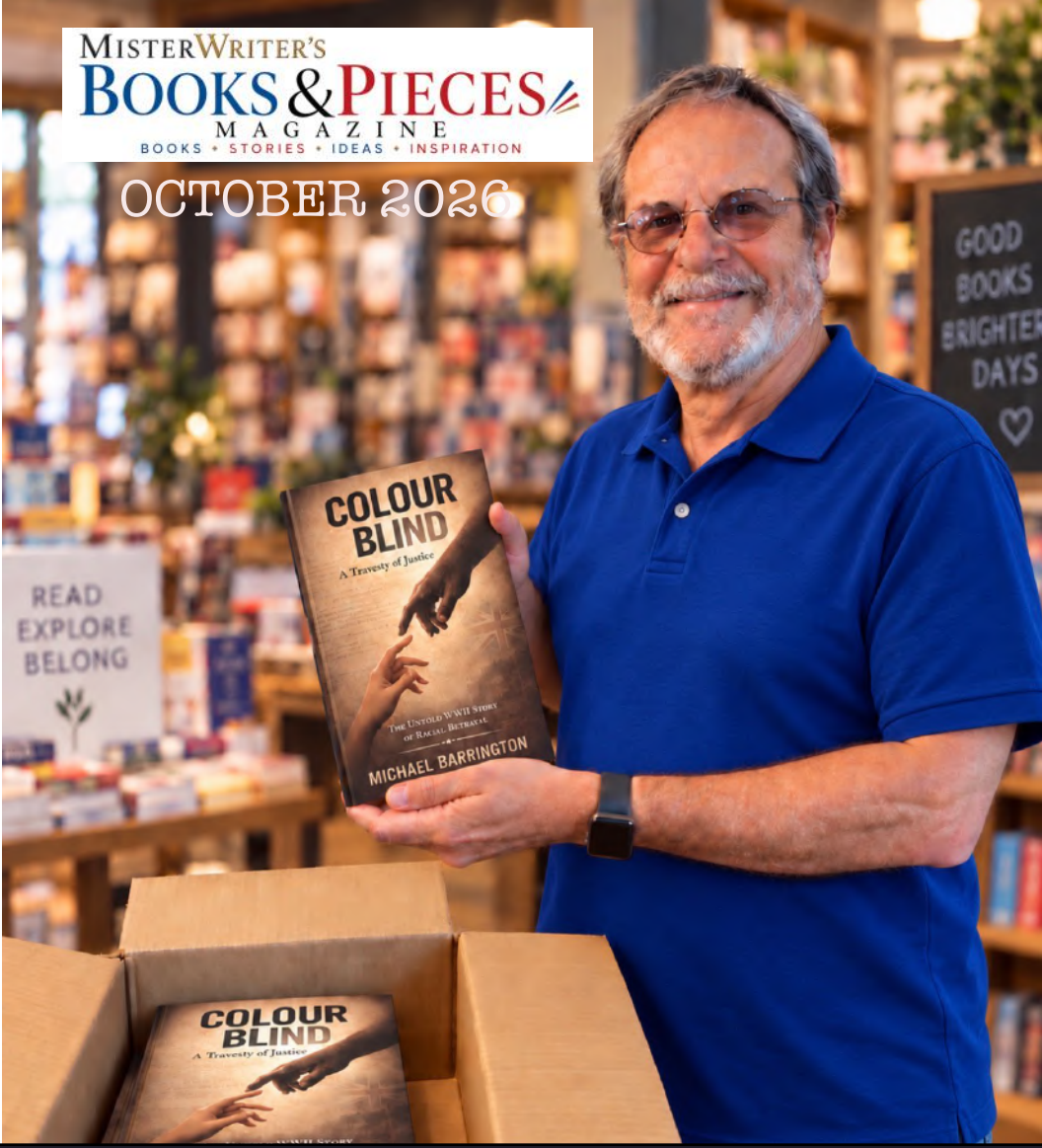
OCTOBER 2026



MICHAEL BARRINGTON:
The Stories That Stay With Us!

Also: Ann Charles, Jennifer Anne Gordon, John Grey Poetry, Book Excerpts & more!

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FROM THE PUBLISHER:

An Interesting Magazine

Books & Pieces Magazine has always been about bringing interesting stories, interviews and articles to both readers and writers.

We've added book chapters as well, a feature that should appeal to authors wanting exposure to their works. And our rates are very low because we know most indie authors are not flowing in cash.

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Check out our rates on the next page.

Give it some thought and reach out if you would like to try us out.

William G
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BOOKS & PIECES

MAGAZINE

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WE SERVE BLACK SOLDIERS ONLY
COLOUR BLIND
A Travesty of Justice
THE UNTOLD WWII STORY OF RACIAL BETRAYAL
MICHAEL BARRINGTON
In January 1943, the villagers of Bamber Bridge, England, welcomed 600 US Black troops with warmth, friendship, and acceptance.
Racist minded, white US Military Police are enraged when local pubs post signs, "We serve Black soldiers only."
Lady Eleanor, falls tragically in love with a much younger GI.
A Black officer's romance leads to a new life in France.
★★★
Read this astounding true WWII story today!

The Stories That Stay With Us!

An Interview with Michael Barrington

Michael Barrington is a British-born author of 13 books and more than 60 published short stories, specializing in historical and literary fiction. A former Catholic missionary priest who spent ten years in West Africa, he has lived and worked across the globe. A dedicated humanitarian and longtime Rotarian, he has helped build schools, drill wells, and provide clean water and sanitation in developing countries. His extraordinary life experiences inspire his writing, and proceeds from his books help support his international humanitarian projects.



Q: What is the story you have spent the longest trying to tell—and why has it stayed with you?

I think the stories that stay with us are the ones that contain something unresolved. That's certainly been the case with my latest novel, **Colourblind**. The events at Bamber Bridge happened more than eighty years ago, but the questions behind them—race, power, injustice, loyalty, and the way history gets suppressed—are still very much alive. I kept coming back to the story because I felt that the Black troops involved deserve to be remembered.

Q: Where do your stories usually begin: with a character, an image, a historical event, a line of dialogue, or a problem you cannot resolve?

Usually with an image or a situation. I may suddenly see a character standing somewhere, or hear a line of dialogue, and wonder what happened before that moment and what is going to happen afterward. I don't necessarily know the story. The writing is often how I discover it although several of my books and many short stories were influenced by the ten years I worked as a missionary in Africa. Three of those years were during the Nigerian Civil War when I was stood up to be shot. Much of my novel No Distance Between Us is based on my experiences.

Q: You have written across different genres and settings. What keeps you returning to fiction?

Fiction allows me to explore

questions that don't have simple answers. You can put a character into a difficult situation and allow the reader to experience the consequences rather than simply explaining them. I like that freedom. Every story gives me another opportunity to look at people and the choices they make.

Q: How much of yourself is hidden in your characters—and how much of yourself are you deliberately trying to keep out?



There is probably something of me in a few of my characters, even when the character is nothing like me on the surface. A writer supplies the imagination, the fears, the observations, and the experiences. But I don't want characters to become versions of myself. They have to surprise me. Once they become real, they should be capable of doing things I wouldn't do.

Q: What do you believe a good story should leave the reader feeling that it does not necessarily tell them directly?

I think the reader should be allowed to discover something. I don't want to explain every emotion or every motivation. Some of the strongest moments in my books are the ones in which the reader understands something that the characters themselves may not fully acknowledge. A good story should leave a little space for the reader to participate.

Q: What have you learned about writing from your own earlier books that you wish you had known when you started?

I wish I had understood earlier that patience is part of writing…to write more slowly. You don't have to solve everything immediately. Sometimes the best thing you can do is stay with a problem and let



the story reveal what it wants to become. I've also learned that rewriting is not correcting failure; it is part of discovering the story.

Q: Which is harder for you: writing the first draft or cutting and rewriting it—and what are you looking for when you revise?

The first draft is always the easiest. I've never had writer's block. But revision is where the real work happens. I look for anything that isn't earning its place. I want the dialogue, description, gestures, and details to do more than one job. I try to make the story tighter without taking away its emotional complexity.

Q: Do you begin a story knowing its ending, or do your characters sometimes take you somewhere you did not expect?

Sometimes I know the ending, but more often I don't. And I prefer not to know everything. I like discovering something along the way that changes my understanding of the story. My characters tell me who they are, how they feel, and what they will say and do.

Q:. Is there a book or writer that changed the way you write—and what did you take from that influence?

I've learned from many writers, especially Edna O'Brien for her

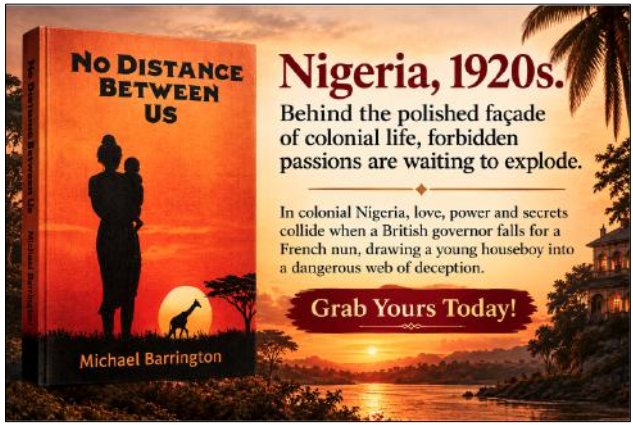


command of language and expression. Alice Munro and Joan Didion have influenced the way I think about the short story. Joan taught me the value of compression—getting rid of everything that doesn't need to be there. Munro showed me that a story can be structurally complex and emotionally subtle without explaining everything to the reader. Both taught me to trust the details.

Q: Historical fiction often requires a writer to balance fact with imagination. Where do you draw the line between what you know and what you invent?

History has to be respected. I want the major facts—the time, place, circumstances, and historical reality—to be accurate. But history often leaves gaps, and

that's where the novelist comes in. I can imagine conversations, private motivations, and relationships, but I don't want invention to distort the historical truth. The challenge is to make history feel alive without pretending that imagination is fact.



Q: What is the most important thing you have learned about creating believable characters?

Characters need contradictions. Real people aren't consistent in the way fictional characters sometimes are. Someone can be generous and selfish, brave and frightened, loving and hurtful. I try to give characters desires that conflict with one another. Once a character has something to lose, he or she becomes much more interesting.

Q: After writing more than a dozen books and many stories, what still excites you enough to sit down and begin another one?

Curiosity. I don't think I would continue writing if I felt I had nothing left to discover. There is always another character I want to understand, another question that bothers me, or another story that I feel hasn't been told. Writing is still a way of finding out what I think.

Q:. Why did you feel that the story of the Black American soldiers at Bamber Bridge needed to be told?

Because it was an extraordinary event that had largely disappeared from public memory. In 1943, Black American soldiers arrived in a Lancashire community where they were welcomed by the local people, while some white American military police tried to impose segregation. What followed was a violent confrontation that left soldiers dead and others court-martialed.

What struck me was not simply the violence. It was the contrast between the official version of events and the human story underneath it. I wanted to bring those people back onto the page—not as historical statistics, but as individuals who loved, feared, hoped, and made choices under extraordinary circumstances.

For me, **Colourblind** is

ultimately about what happens when ordinary human relationships challenge an imposed system of prejudice.

Learn more about Michael Barrington at the following:

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An Excerpt from **ColourBlind: A Travesty of Justice** by Michael Barrington

The Encounter

Thursday night, June 24th, 1943, at the Old Hob Inn, should have been relatively quiet. I say, relatively, since the following day, being the end of the week and payday for mill workers, is usually, like most Fridays, busy, noisy and packed to overflowing with customers. But this was wartime, and to George Harrison, the landlord, almost every evening was the same. For a couple of hours, folk could forget about rationing, having always and at all times to carry a gas mask, stumble through unlit streets, and in order to avoid the wrath of air raid wardens, ensure that their lodgings and homes were almost hermetically sealed with not the slightest chink of light showing behind their blackout material. *The Hob*, as the pub was affectionately called, was a place where the beer was good, the hosts well known and respected for their hospitality, and if you wanted to sing or play darts in Bamber Bridge, this was the place to be.

I'd been coming here ever since my newspaper, the Lancashire Evening Post had run my story a couple of months earlier, that broke open a potential rape case and caused the local US camp commander, Colonel Jack Pitcher, not a little heartache as it exposed issues of incompetence and bias by white military police. I'd never had the misfortune of interacting with these soldiers, but feel certain that, if I had, we might have exchanged impolite words. The colored GIs had also shared many stories with me, about how they were constantly harassed by them. It was galling to be asked to show their passes or, even worse, their dog tags while escorting a lady friend, since it meant partially disrobing. But it was not just the discomfort and embarrassment that irritated them. It was common knowledge that the white MPs and officers were bothered by, and jealous of, colored GIs dating white women, and seemed determined to make their lives as
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uncomfortable as possible.

Having made many new friends on the Adams Hall base, I had witnessed some of this. I'd often seen MPs sitting in their Jeep outside one of the three pubs on Station Road, as I bicycled home at night, clearly waiting and looking for the slightest legal infraction. But I was also being educated about racial discrimination and how it was part and parcel of life in the USA. I'd seen how even in England, from my reporting on the alleged rape case, the issue could quickly turn ugly, but it was something I could not fully understand and certainly could never accept. It seemed insane to me that since we were all allies and fighting for the same cause, the color of one's skin or ethnic background should become an issue for discrimination.

But I digress. I'd been engrossed watching a man in a wheelchair and wearing an RAF uniform, who everybody called Cat, taking on all comers at darts. He was deadly, and although his hand and fingers were deformed, even the newly elected team captain, Curtis Doakes, threw up his hands in surrender after just one game. I noticed Cat wore his RAF uniform with his ribbons; the Distinguished Flying Cross with a Bar, which showed he had acted gallantly during several flying operations. The British Empire ribbon is rarely awarded, and it was only when I asked his mother, who sometimes came for a drink, that I learned that Norman, as she called him, had rescued a member of his crew from their burning aircraft. I understood then why his face and hands were so disfigured. And yet nobody in the pub stared or gave him preferential treatment.

He and I had chatted a few times. It was after my story broke and I came to The Hob Inn, simply to see what the atmosphere was like, that I got the shock of my life. I could not put my hand into my pocket to get my money; it seemed like everyone wanted to buy me a beer. Cat wheeled himself over, once the initial cheers had died down, and I was ensconced in a quiet corner. It wasn't a long conversation, just a "Thank you, Charlie, for what you did. Being born in this village, I know how warm-hearted and most folk are with their genuine northern hospitality, but I also know there are always a few gossipers who seem to thrive on spreading rumors or, if there are none, then creating their own."

I laughed. "Well, as a news reporter, it's my job to sort out fact from fiction, and I got lucky. And thank *you* for *your* service."

He smiled awkwardly. Then, holding up his beer glass, said, "We should drink a toast to truth, friendship, and good beer."

Billy Crossland, a colored GI, was banging away at the piano

and taking requests. He had a great singing voice, and it was infectious; people wanted to join in. It was noisy, and I was leaning over talking to a young lady I'd introduced myself to, Linda Shipley. She and two of her friends were in ATS uniform, and she was telling me how the Auxiliary Territorial Service worked. While her companions were occupied with two animated, colored GIs, she explained the crucial part in the overall war effort the ATS played, by filling non-combat positions that were essential for the Army's functioning. She was an ambulance driver; the others worked in the telephone and signals division. All three were attached to the North Lancashire Army Regiment at Kimberley Barracks, four miles away. Her boss had allowed her the use of a staff car for the evening, and she'd parked it at the McKenzie Arms where they'd met two colored GIs, drank a beer and then made their way to The Hob. I shared that I was a reporter, and was exempt from military service since I was deaf in one ear, the result of a childhood accident.

"You look okay to me," she said with a smile.

"Then will you let me take you out on a date?" I replied, hoping the answer would be yes. But before she could answer, there was a commotion at the bar. The barmaid had already rung the bell for "Last Orders," so customers knew they had fifteen minutes to finish their drinks before the doors were closed. I noticed a colored GI was pleading with the barmaid for a drink, but she was adamant.

"Sorry, soldier, but it's closing time. We've rung the bell." Doris Billington said.

"But, Doris, you know me, Gene Nunn. I'm a regular, and I just got here. The traffic from Manchester on the A6 was horrible, and there was a terrible accident near Chorley. I rushed to get here. I didn't even go to the base to change my uniform."

"Oh, cut it out, Gene," his friend, Lynn Adams, said, tugging at his sleeve. "Leave her alone. Let's get back to base. But if you're really desperate, then take one of these," and offered him a bottle of ale. "I've bought three of them to take with me for a nightcap."

The door suddenly opened, and a deathly hush settled over the room. A white MP had entered. Standing feet apart, he menacingly scanned the crowd. All eyes turned on him; the thwack of his nightstick as he slapped it into his gloved palm, seemed inordinately loud.

"Two of our officers reported that there is trouble here. What seems to be the problem?" he said to nobody in particular.

"There have been no officers in here this evening," the landlord, George Harrison, said, coming around the bar to speak to him. "And there is no disturbance. Last drinks have been ordered, and I'm about to close the doors. It must be somewhere else."

A look of consternation came over the MP's face. He was about to leave when he spotted Private Nunn wearing fatigues. Pointing his nightstick at him, "Private, where's your pass?" Squeezing towards him, Nunn saluted.

"I don't have one, sir. I have just come off duty."

"Then, I'm going to arrest you for that and for being out of uniform."

"Now, hold on, Private Ridgeway," the landlord said, noting his name tag. "Nobody is getting arrested in my pub tonight. Gene isn't bothering anybody."

Before the MP could respond, a commanding voice addressed him.

"Why don't you simply go on your way, soldier, and leave him alone. He's had a busy day, and all he wants is a drink," and seeing the bottle in Gene's hand, added, "which he now has." All eyes turned on Cat Caton who had wheeled himself close to the door. "We are all about to go home, anyway. So why not go somewhere else and catch a real criminal." Sitting there in full RAF uniform, complete with military decorations, his words, spoken with authority, flummoxed the MP.

I watched in amazement as the crowd seemed to press closer around Gene. There was no way they would allow an arrest, and from the look on Ridgeway's face, he also knew it. This was clearly not the reception he had expected.

"Then be on your way, soldier," he said, addressing Nunn. "Get the hell out of here. Go straight back to the base. And if I ever see you out of uniform again. You will know what to expect."

The tension inside the pub dissipated as the MP turned and went out. It was also a good time for me to leave, and I quietly invited Linda Shipley to walk with me. The two other ATS women left with their colored GI friends, and once outside we became part of a crowd, probably a dozen or more colored soldiers, watching another white MP about to arrest an out of uniform, colored GI. I was close enough to read the MP's name tag, Corporal Roy Windsor. He was questioning the soldier, but was bothered by the muttering and irritated crowd exiting the pub.

"Have you chaps got nothing better to do on a Thursday night?" someone shouted to Windsor. "Get the hell out of here and leave this man alone. He's harming no

one." The MP's face registered concern and confusion. At that moment, a colored GI, whose name I learned later was Lynn Adams, and carrying two bottles of beer, pushed forward and said, "He's already on his way back to the camp. Let him go."

"You need, to stand back, Private. Let me do my duty."

Adams had had too much to drink and failed to heed the order. The MP repeated it, but again with no response other than for Adams to advance even closer to him.

"God Damit, leave the man alone. Let him get back to the camp."

Suddenly, Windsor pulled his pistol and pointed it directly at Adams.

"Stand back or I am going to shoot."

I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. Was this really happening on a village street in England? This was like a Wild West scene in the movies. I pulled Linda close to me, putting an arm around her shoulders, sensing she was afraid. I would have liked to take her aside, but we were boxed in by the crowd that had swelled with the folk exiting the pub. Would one soldier kill another from the same country; and for what? I wondered. This was scary, idiotic, and, clearly, the MP had not been trained to do his job properly. My mind was running in circles wondering how I would write a feature story about this. What could have been a tragic event was avoided, however, when a colored staff sergeant, William Byrd, intervened.

Byrd placed his hand on Windsor's arm. "I wouldn't shoot, if I were you, corporal. If you are going to do anything, control the situation with your nightstick."

Windsor, blinked, looked at Byrd and then slowly holstered his gun. Without another word, he moved towards his Jeep. The look on his face showed he feared the situation might get further out of control, and shouted to his colleague, who was standing at the back of the crowd, "Let's go."

As Ridgeway walked towards the Jeep, a colored GI grabbed his arm, but the MP lashed out with his club and the man released his grip.

"This will not be the end of it," MP Windsor said to the crowd and fired up the Jeep. But as it was about to depart, a bottle sailed through the air and exploded on the windshield. "Just wait, you guys. Just you wait." Ridgeway hollered. "We are coming back."

I was still shaken by the incident, as was Linda. A group of about twelve of us, all colored GIs except for the three women and me, began walking up Station Road towards the camp. I stopped

after a few minutes, then went to collect my bicycle from where I had left it behind the pub. My apartment was in the opposite direction.

"It's been lovely meeting you, Linda, and I'm so looking forward to our date. Are you sure that meeting outside the Odeon Cinema in Preston at 6:30 PM is good for you?"

"Yes, Charlie, that's fine," she said. "I've had such a nice evening. It's a pity it had to end with such a sad and scary thing. You are a proper gentleman, and I'm looking forward to Saturday."

We never did watch a movie. I was quite excited at the thoughts of a date with a lovely woman, something that had not happened for more than a year. I'd even bought a box of Cadbury's Milk Chocolate as a surprise for her, courtesy of a newspaper colleague who said he had black market *connection*s. But as soon as I saw her face, and I gave her a hug, I knew something was terribly wrong. Was I about to be told, it was over? That she no longer wanted to see me. My heart was pounding. My mind racing, thinking about all kinds of negative possibilities and how I would respond. I'd been building up my expectations for two days. If this were the end, I would handle it gracefully, but emotionally I would be crushed.

"Charlie, can we go somewhere to talk?" she said, and I could see tears beginning to well up. "I really need to share a few things with you."

Drawing her gently towards me and holding her in my arms, I said, "Of course, Linda," hoping she could not feel my pounding heart. "There's a comfortable pub near here, the Rose and Crown, it's quite large, and even on a Saturday night, we should be able to find a quiet table. We can walk there in less than five minutes."

I seated us at a corner table in a small room next to the bar area; there were only two other couples, and they were locked deep in their own conversations. I was still anxious and worried as I ordered drinks and brought them back to the table. But as soon as I sat down, she placed one hand on top of mine and said, "Charlie, promise you will never disclose or share what I am about to tell you. My military bosses have sworn me to secrecy." In that simple gesture, in that instant, inwardly I breathed an enormous sigh of relief. Our relationship was not over.

"Have you heard what happened at Bamber Bridge last Thursday night, after you and I said our goodnights?" she began.

"Well, there are lots of rumors, gossip, and people keeping their heads down, just saying nothing," I replied. "I was at The Hub last

night, and people are scared. There were no Negroes in the pub. Something terrible has happened at the camp. But no. Nobody is really talking. However, I was at Preston Infirmary this morning and spoke with a GI who'd been shot. He said the GI, who played the piano at The Hub, had died. Another was in bed further down the ward. He was also shot in the back."

"Oh, my God, Charlie. It was horrible. I saw it all. Shortly after you left, our group had grown, and about fifteen of us continued walking towards Adams Hall camp. All three of us ATS girls were walking to the staff car I'd parked behind the McKenzie Arms. Some in our group were tipsy and noisy, although everyone could walk. The group was in good spirits, and we were the only people on the street. In fact, I was walking with Staff Segreant Byrd in the rear, and he asked them to tone it down so as not to wake up the locals." She took a sip of her beer, then fished in her purse and brought out a tiny handkerchief.

"Suddenly, a Jeep came towards us, drove past and a few minutes later came back, drew level with us and stopped. There were four MPs. I recognized two of them; they were the ones who had showed up earlier at the pub. Three of them got out of the Jeep, immediately drew their guns and waved them at us. They were shouting and cursing at the colored soldiers, using some words I'd never heard before. I was terrified. We had done nothing wrong. We were loud, but not breaking the law. Then one of the MPs, shouted out something like, 'Let's kill the n…r bastards.'"

Everybody stopped walking, and the men and the MPs hurled insults, taunts, and curses at each other. The MP, who earlier drove the Jeep away from the pub, held a nightstick in one hand and a gun in the other, and pointed it at the GI wearing fatigues. Then he started thrashing him with the stick, all the while calling him n…r trash. Another GI came to help him and smashed a bottle on the MP's head. He dropped to the ground with blood pouring from his forehead. A man, a civilian, rushed over and tied a handkerchief around his head. Two MPs pointed their guns at the GI. "Let's kill the black bastard," said one, then the other, "Stay where you are, n…r. Don't move." It was clear they wanted to arrest him.

I can't remember exactly what happened next, Charlie, but there was a horrible fight. Almost every man got involved. Some men went into gardens and collected rocks, and others dug up cobblestones from the pavement. The three of us girls took shelter in a shop doorway. We didn't know what to do. We were frightened to death. It

was crazy. But things seemed to calm down a little, and the GIs started to move away. Suddenly, a shot rang out. The GI with the bottle yelled and put a hand up to his neck. Blood was pouring out. Someone shouted, "Let's get out of here."

Linda paused. "Am I saying too much, Charlie? I was told not to talk to anyone or share anything about that night. But I can't keep it in. I needed to talk to somebody."

"You're doing just fine, Linda. I'm simply a pair of ears. I'm not wearing my reporter's hat tonight."

"I'd noticed that one MP had stayed with the Jeep. He finally got out, drew his gun and waved it at the group. Two GI's threw rocks at him, then ran away. But he fired; one Negro fell to the ground. He fired again and almost in front of me, another soldier cried out," the bastards have shot me." He was shot in the back. I almost passed out. I heard a voice shout "They've shot Billy." He was covered in blood. Sergeant Byrd and another GI helped him to his feet and began walking him towards the camp. Suddenly the MPs jumped into their Jeep and raced off down Station Road towards Preston. I don't know what happened afterwards as the three of us ran like mad women to the parking lot where I had left the car."

Reaching over, Charlie put his arm around her shoulder. "That was awful," he said. "You must have been scared out of your mind. If I were in your shoes, I'd probably feel the same way. It's a lot to handle. Can I get you another drink?"

"Yes, please. I'm feeling so much better now."

"It's good to see your smile again," he said, putting the pint glass in front of her. "It lights up the room and my life. I too, have something to share with you. What happened on Thursday night and what happened to you is terrible, but it is only half of the story. There was chaos in the village as the Negroes armed themselves. There were shots fired throughout the night. Word somehow got back to my newspaper about this gun battle. I was at work, and was hoping to get the assignment. After I asked my boss about it, he took me into his office and closed the door. He needed to talk to me privately. I can't remember his ever having done that before.

"Look, lad," he said. "You're probably the best reporter I have, and you certainly know Bamber Bridge. But here's the hard truth. This is wartime, and word has come from the very top: this event never happened. You understand? I can't tell you more than that. No matter what your resources tell you. All is well in the village. So,

there you have it. Why don't you bicycle over there and enjoy a pint at that nice place, what's it called, the Old Hob Inn, and find some good local news."

"I'm just beginning to get the picture, Linda. When I was there on Friday night, George, the landlord, told me about a strange happening. That very morning, a group of MPs, with help from the local police force, were sent throughout the village to find and collect spent cartridge shells, and to hide as many bullet holes as possible."

"That's very strange, Charlie."

"I agree, but if you take what your bosses said to you, add it to that of mine, then include the bizarre clean-up action, there is a clear picture. Both the British and American militaries want to bury this story. It's clear there are issues of race and segregation within the ranks. They know that if this incident is not managed properly and controlled, it could seriously affect troop morale."

The rest of the evening was very pleasant. We talked about our families, how we both enjoyed swimming, (she had been a high school champion), hiking and listening to plays on the radio. We both liked theater and said we would look for opportunities to enjoy it together, even possibly traveling to Manchester. But more importantly, she agreed to another date.

What I didn't share with her was my private interest in the Battle of Bamber Bridge, for that would be the name of my story when I eventually write it. There was so much I needed to know, and in the coming weeks, I would try to piece together all that took place on the night of June 24th, and its aftermath. George Harrison at The Hob, seemed to have his finger on the pulse of things since the pub was the one place where people could freely talk, The military might want to keep a lid on the events, but as a newspaperman, I believe people deserved to know the truth.

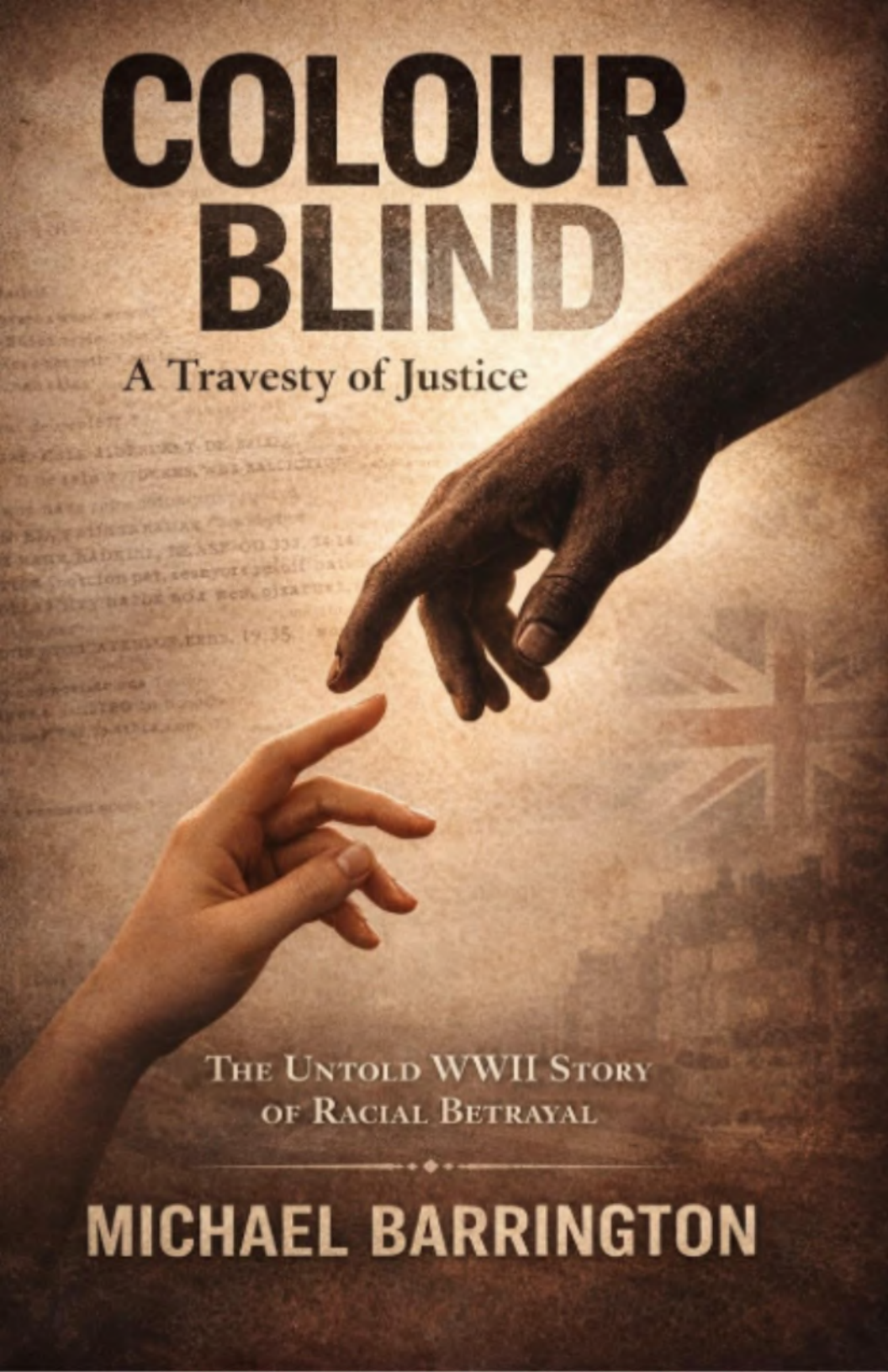
BUY **COLOURBLIND: A Travesty of Justice** by Michael Barrington

Visit https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GGXPV15S



COLOUR BLIND

A Travesty of Justice



THE UNTOLD WWII STORY OF RACIAL BETRAYAL

MICHAEL BARRINGTON



Ann Charles is a USA Today Bestselling author who writes hilarious, sometimes hair-raising, award-winning books filled with humor, mystery, adventure, romance, supernatural, and more! She has a B.A. in English (creative writing) from the Univ. of Washington. When she isn't escaping into story worlds filled with rowdy characters, she's arm wrestling her kids, road tripping with her husband, and arguing with her sassy cats.

Question: For listeners new to the series, what is the world of Jackrabbit Junction?

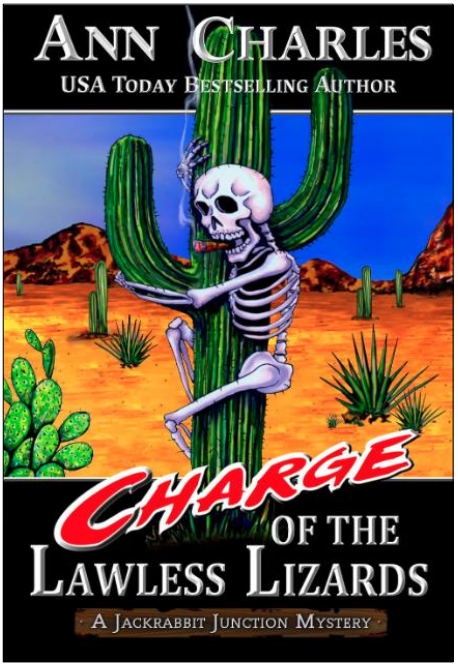
Ann Charles: It takes place in southeastern Arizona, out in the boonies among the cacti, lizards, and tortoises. One of the main settings is an RV park.

At the center are the three Morgan sisters—Claire, Kate and Veronica. They're in their thirties and are the "lawless" part of the series. They occasionally end up in jail for things they don't consider particularly serious, although the sheriff might disagree.

Each book has a mystery, but the series is more character-driven than mystery-driven. The characters and relationships continue developing from book to book, with plenty of humor, romance, criminals, and chaos.

Michael Hawley: Does some of that lawlessness come from real life?

Ann Charles: My parents listen to these interviews, so I can't say too much! But I've told my adult



daughter stories about my past and had her say, "Really, Mom?"

Some of it comes from living vicariously through these women. They can be wild and rowdy and do things most of us probably shouldn't.

Question: Where did the idea for *Charge of the Lawless Lizards* come from?

Ann Charles: The series titles usually combine something from the desert with action—*Dance of the Winnebagos*, *The Rowdy Coyote Rumble*, *Twisty Tortoise Tussles* and so on.

This book is about chaos. It's also the first time I've written six points of view. Previously, five seemed like a lot. Halfway through this one, I wondered who in their right mind would try six!

The final chapter was particularly challenging because I wanted the point of view to move naturally from character to character without traditional scene breaks, almost like a camera moving continuously through a room.

Question: Are the Morgan sisters based on people you know?

Ann Charles: I have two sisters. Our oldest is the bossiest, and Veronica is the bossy oldest Morgan sister. I'm the youngest, like Kate, and my middle sister has some similarities to Claire.

I've even dedicated one of the earlier books to my sisters because there's a lot of real-life experience mixed into these relationships.

Question: Is the relationship between the sisters really the heart of the series?

Ann Charles: Absolutely. They're not lovey-dovey. They insult and pick on each other, but when the chips are down, they'd take a bullet for one another.

It's a dysfunctional but very strong family. They can pick on each other, but if an outsider comes after one of them, the others will go for that person's throat.

Michael Hawley: Do the Morgan sisters attract trouble, or does trouble find them?

Ann Charles: Both. Kate, the youngest, is nosy and goes looking for mysteries. Veronica is different because her ex-husband is in prison after becoming involved with serious criminals, so trouble comes looking for her.

Claire is the most level-headed. She'll investigate, but she doesn't particularly enjoy getting shot at or stabbed.

Question: You've also got assassins in this book. Where do they fit?

Ann Charles: They're connected to Veronica. Her ex-husband is in prison and has turned on some dangerous criminals. Those people believe they can use Veronica to get to him, even though she now loathes him.

That means she has a target on her back.

Question: With all the danger, you move very quickly into comedy. What's one of the funniest elements in this book?

Ann Charles: Penny, the sheriff's sister, owns the local diner and bakery. She's making some rather erotic desserts, including her version of "better than sex" donuts.

Her aunt immediately figures out what's going on and wants to know who Penny is sleeping with.

I love writing scenes involving some of the older characters because they're in their sixties, active, flirting, and enjoying themselves. Younger people sometimes act as if sex and adventure end when you get older. My characters definitely disagree.

Michael Hawley: If somebody were trying to kill you, which Morgan sister would you want beside you?

Ann Charles: Claire. Easy.

She's a fighter. If a fight breaks out, she's usually already in the middle of it, swinging. She doesn't hesitate to rush into danger. She's also the character who started the series and, in many ways, remains its backbone.

Question: Can somebody start with *Charge of the Lawless Lizards*, or should they begin with book one?

Ann Charles: I provide enough backstory that someone can understand each book independently, but I recommend starting at the beginning.

You'll understand the relationships, jokes, and character development much better because everything builds throughout the

series.

Question: After seven books, if the Morgan sisters knocked on your door and said, "Get in the car, we need your help," would you go?

Ann Charles: My kids are grown now, so absolutely. I'm going on the adventure!

Question: What's next for Ann Charles?

Ann Charles: My husband and I are working on book six of the Deadwood Undertaker series, which mixes the Old West, supernatural elements, and humor. The next release is *Blow Your Hat Off*.

After that, I'm returning to the Deadwood Mystery series for book fifteen.

I've realized I don't want writing to be entirely about reaching some distant goal. I want to enjoy the journey, have fun with these characters, and make people laugh. If I'm writing humor and I'm not laughing while I'm writing it, something is wrong.

Question: Where can readers find you?

Ann Charles: My website is AnnCharles.com. I'm also on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Patreon. I'm pretty much everywhere.

Question: Everybody, pick up *Charge of the Lawless Lizards*, book seven in the Jackrabbit Junction series.

Find Ann Charles at:

Website: anncharles.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/AnnCharlesAuthorPage/

Interview courtesy of Alan R. Warren, House of Mystery Radio



TEXAS DEAD

A SEASON OF DEATH

"Texas Dead is a foot-jammed-on-the-gas-pedal crime novel with a solid plot and stellar characters."
~~Steve Quade, IndiesToday.com

NATIONAL INDIE EXCELLENCE® AWARDS
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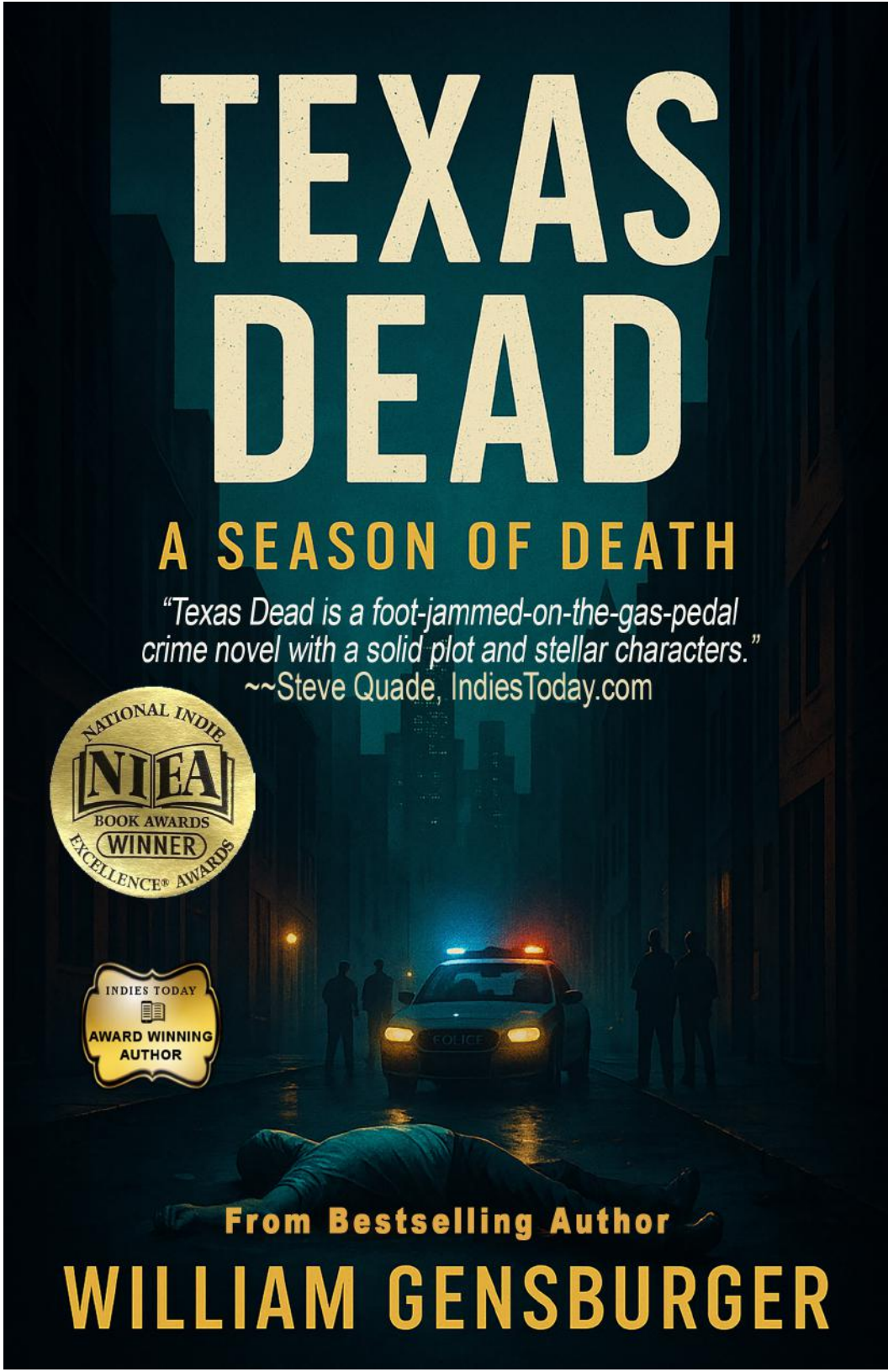
WINNER

INDIES TODAY
AWARD WINNING AUTHOR



From Bestselling Author

WILLIAM GENSBURGER

BOOK CHAPTER:

TEXAS DEAD - A SEASON OF DEATH

by Wiliam Gensburger

The pretty detective was late, not that it mattered—the corpse, which had been face down in the alley for quite some time, wasn't going anywhere. Although she had known since seven in the morning, despite the break in the rain and an abundance of cabs, she arrived after the last reporter on the scene. This annoyed her more than anything else; her car was in the shop—new brakes—leaving her no way to get here.

Maxie preferred to be at crime scenes before the reporters arrived. It gave the image of professionalism; she was a firm believer in professionalism. It also allowed her a chance to examine the scene free of distractions, even before the medical examiner. Clues were to be found everywhere. From the position of the body, items around, skin mottling, as well as the attire of the victim, all were clues that could be useful in her first look.

The city was Corpus Christi, Texas, the name a literal translation meaning the body of Christ, which, as she approached, she thought ironic, given this body, along with the others she had recently encountered, would experience no resurrection. Worse, this was the fifteenth body of the year, and it was only April. Usually, Corpus Christi had between five and ten murders a year. This was, she considered, a spate of killings and out of the norm, a very ominous sign.

Her partner, Kobe Jameson, a thirty-something Jamaican man with a smoothly shaved head and equally smooth, dark skin, was already on the scene. He nodded at her as she approached. Kobe had been her right hand for the past nine years; she relied on him to keep her—as she liked to call it—balanced, especially during the heat of the cases when things happened quickly, as tempers boiled over. Kobe had a keen eye, a knack for following leads, and, more critical to Maxie, a sense of humor. In this line of work, you need a sense of humor or the life gets sucked right out of you, she thought. Burnout rates were high.

The camera crews were finishing up their background shots. Reporters are like birds on a phone line, she considered, all looking the same, moving the same, with similar gestures. All were trying to be relevant in their moment of fame.

Her full name was MacKenzie Michaels, but everyone called her 'Maxie.' Tall, slender, with shoulder-length light-brown hair with a hint of added color, usually auburn. She was thirty-eight, attractive, with a contagious smile and an even more infectious laugh; a seasoned detective with many cases under her belt—not just cases, but solved cases, something that earned her praise from the higher-ups, giving her a degree of autonomy and political clout. Everyone wanted to be close to Maxie. Maxie was the standard to which they aspired.

Today, she wore a linen skirt and a collared blouse, with her trademark pale blue silk scarf. Maxie always believed in looking her best, part of the charm that captivated the public, the paparazzi, and the local celebrities. Because you deal in homicides for a living doesn't mean you can't look good, she thought.

"Detective MacKenzie Michaels has arrived on the scene of the latest in a string of bizarre murders that have the police baffled," one of the reporters, a woman named Jilweena Davis, told the camera, filling in the front matter of the story already completed before Maxie's arrival. "The victim, an approximately thirty-five-year-old caucasian male, has not yet been identified. It is believed, however, like the others murdered last week, a connection to organized crime cannot be ruled out." Seeing Maxie walking close to her, the reporter reached out with a hand, waving her closer. "Maxie, can you share any information?"

Maxie stopped and smiled at her. "Good morning, Jilweena," she said, noting Jilweena appreciated the first name recognition; it made it appear, to the viewing public, they were friends, though they were not. "We're in the process of identifying the victim. Of course, this is another tragedy for Corpus Christi. We are actively pursuing all leads and will make a statement as soon as possible. Thank you."

Jilweena smiled at Maxie, then turned back to the camera. "As you can see, information is not yet forthcoming in what some have called a gang-style killing spree. Hopefully, we will learn more shortly. This is Jilweena Davis for Channel Six News. Back to you in the studio."

"We're clear," the cameraman told her, already dismantling the camera couplings to load back into the van. The equipment was compact enough that one man could load, unload, set up, and take down everything quickly within a few minutes.

The medical examiner's assistant zipped up the corpse in a standard heavy, dark, body-sized duffel bag. Chief M.E. Sammy Yatsuki moved closer to Maxie. "The vic is Curtis Delaney per his driver's license. Cause of death: blunt force trauma to the back of the head."

"When?"

"Given skin mottling and liver temp, I'd say sometime late last night, maybe ten or eleven."

Sammy had been a transplant from Tokyo, Japan. His family had moved during his teen years, so he had the benefit of dual cultures, the former pushing him, along with his parents, to excel in his degree course in Forensic Pathology.

Jameson handed Maxie the wallet with the license. She pulled out the contents—a business card with his name and company name: Stanton Investments, Corpus Christi, Texas. On the back, it read: In Case of Emergency: Devin Parker (361) 886-2600

"Not like the others," Jameson said. "No gunshot wound." Maxie nodded. She had noticed that as well. At this stage of the investigation, it

could mean anything. Still, given the consistency of the other killings, this one could well be unrelated. Great, just what we need: a different killer, she thought.

"Sammy, anything else I should know?"

The M.E. nodded. "He didn't die here. He was already dead when the body was dropped."

"Thanks. We'll check video feeds from security cameras to see what we can learn."

"I will get started," Jameson said.

Maxie moved closer to where Jameson was standing. "You're looking at me strangely."

"You look very stylish," Jameson replied with a smile. "That is all."

"Thank you, Kobe. It's nice to be appreciated." She smiled, brushed back some hair, then handed him back the wallet. "Be a doll and drop me at Bud's Garage on Costa—they're holding my Audi hostage?"

Bud Harringer was the owner of Bud's Garage. Her car had broken down the morning after she arrived six years ago. Bud, who was still driving their tow vehicle at the time, rescued her. Bud's had been her go-to for car work ever since, treated her fairly, and knew a lot about the goings-on in Corpus Christi.

"Of course, I will," Jameson replied. "The public thinks all these killings are related. It is not a positive for the city. Will you advise the chief to issue a statement?"

"Not yet. What we need is to find a solid lead and a decent plan of attack," Maxie replied. She got into his car, a small Ford Fusion. "It's the million-dollar trick," she added. "I feel like I'm missing something obvious."

The killing had taken place downtown, although she did not yet know that, in an alleyway on People's Street, connected to Water Street, next to Shoreline Boulevard, by the Marina. The area was not a lower-class neighborhood, recently revitalized with upgrades to infrastructure—roadways resurfaced so tourists, some of the lifeblood of the city, could enjoy what many Corpus Christi residents—and Texans in general—could not: smooth roads to drive on, free of the usual potholes. She used to joke that you needed a military Humvee to avoid ruining your alignment or your tires with all the potholes.

Homes along this part of the city were expensive. As you moved along the coastline, huge mansions—money mansions, as she called them—lined the roadway, each architecturally different from the others. Some homes were in an opulent Spanish style, while others next door might appear more like a medieval castle, complete with turrets. It amused her how people with money often lacked taste, especially in their home designs. The color schemes! She wouldn't be caught dead living there; she considered it gaudy, not to mention exposed—exposed to the ever-increasing traffic, for one thing. There was a lot more crime since COVID-19 changed the world. But these homes all had one thing in

common—the view of the bay, Mustang Island, and, though they could not see it except from the highest of rooftops, the Gulf of Mexico, a large basin that was an adjunct to the Atlantic Ocean, stretching from Mexico to the Florida Keys. The view of the bay was amazing, usually clear, with a massive variety of marine birds flying by. The water itself was shallow for quite some distance out before dropping into deeper water, allowing the fisherman to wade out a few hundred yards, waist-deep, yet still be able to catch a lot of fish. On the Gulf side of Mustang Island, you could take a fishing boat farther out to find all manner of fish from trout to marlin, the cold water variety available in abundance, although strictly enforced limits were in place to protect the species from overfishing—licenses with Fish and Game enforcement.

Of course, the Gulf of Mexico was regularly home to seasonal hurricanes, many of which managed to rotate further south, past Louisiana, slamming into the Texas coast right at Corpus Christi. Hurricane Katrina was one hurricane that hit Louisiana in 2005, with sustained winds exceeding 125 mph. The damage there lasted through the last two decades, with a quarter of the state still impacted. The extent of the damage forced many residents to be relocated to Houston, Texas, where they still remain.

Hurricane Harvey, in 2017, was the last Category 4 hurricane to impact Corpus Christi, slamming into Louisiana and Texas, making landfall at Port Aransas and Rockport, and causing tidal swells of over ten feet. This resulted in 69 deaths as a direct result. Corpus Christi suffered wind damage to roofs, trees, power lines, and backups to storm drains, causing flooding.

This was during Maxie's second year in Corpus Christi. The city issued a voluntary evacuation order, with most businesses shutting down for a week.

Eighty percent of the homes in Aransas Pass, Rockport, and Port Aransas, homes not built to withstand such an onslaught, were destroyed. Elsewhere, homes had storm shutters that residents would screw into place, removing any items that could be dislodged and thrown by the force of the winds to become projectiles, causing further damage.

It had been a trial-by-fire introduction for Maxie, who found great purpose in assisting residents, many of whom had been displaced. It also gave her a chance to get to know many people—people you help in emergencies, never forget every small act of kindness. She brought meals to those families with children, still without power. She worked with emergency crews, extricating people trapped.

On the drive to Bud's, she joked about it with Jameson. Then, she fell silent. He would notice after a few minutes, glance over at her to see if she was all right. She pretended not to notice. After a few more minutes of silence, he gave up and awaited the inevitable play.

"Did you kill him, Kobe?" she

asked her partner, matter-of-factly. Kobe laughed. He knew this game; she played it often, especially if she had time to kill. "Where were you last night between the hours of ten and midnight?" She did this with no facial expression. He chuckled again. "You're a spy, aren't you?" she added. "You're working for the Russians? Or is it the Chinese?"

"You got me there," he answered. "But I do have an alibi."

"What might that be?"

He looked at her. "Were we not playing poker on your deck last night?"

"Ah," she said, a massive grin on her face. "That is your excuse? You left at nine, as I recall. Nice try, though."

"So am I under arrest?" he asked resignedly.

"I'm mulling it over. It might be necessary for me to have you wear the cuffs, though."

Jameson shook his head. "It would make my driving quite dangerous."

"I suppose. Well, don't leave town. I may have more questions later."

"I will not leave," he assured her. "I have nowhere else to go."

* * *

After they reached the repair shop, while she waited for her car to be brought out, she dialed the number on Curtis Delaney's wallet card to leave a message.

"Mr. Devin Parker, this is Detective Michaels at CCPD. I need to speak with you at your earliest convenience. Could you please come down to the station at 321 John Sartain Street, at the corner of North Chaparral? You can call me at this number if you can't find it. Thank you."

"It will not be a pleasant day for him," Jameson said.

"Can't be helped. He needs to identify the body. I have an odd feeling about this one, Kobe. It isn't straightforward like the others."

The lot boy, an eighteen-something with shaggy hair tied into a man-bun, brought out her Galaxy-Blue Metallic Audi Q7. "You washed her," she gushed. "You guys are too much. Thank you."

"It's a beautiful color," the lot boy told her with a hint of envy in his voice. He would have loved to own the car, unlike the heavily used Dodge truck he had bought for five hundred dollars, systematically replacing the alternator, fuel pump, tires, and rebuilding the engine over three weeks, using money earned from his job.

"It truly is," Maxie replied. She turned to Jameson. "Thanks for the ride."

"You are welcome. I will see you at the office after you...?"

"After I what?"

"You know what," he said. "You always stop."

"Stop where?" she said coyly. "Kobe, I have no idea what you are talking about."

"You know where," he laughed, his prominent teeth white against his skin. "You can bring me a Danish as a thank you for driving you around."

Now it was her turn to laugh. He did know her well. She nodded

and watched as he started up his car and drove off. She waved after him.

A quarter-mile up the street, on the way to the office, as they both called it, was a quaint pastry shop. It was called Just A Taste. It occupied what must have been, at one time, an older private residence fully converted for commercial use. It was a mother-daughter operation: Judy and Teresa Valencia had the best coffee, and the tastiest treats Maxie had found in her entire time in Corpus Christi.

The outside of the building had an ornate pink trim with its sign firmly centered. Soft curtains framed the windows. A series of small bistro tables were arranged in what once was a dining room, while on the left, the refrigerated glass counter displayed anything perishable.

As usual, both were working, Judy bringing out fresh pastries and cakes while Teresa was handling the register and serving the customers. The aroma of the coffee was comforting, making you want to order some even if you hated coffee.

"Hola Maxie," Theresa called out. Judy turned back and put her tray down to wave at Maxie, who was approaching the counter.

"You look fabulous, Maxie," Judy told her. "Always younger each time I see you. I'm envious."

Maxie beamed. "You both lie so well," she said. "That's why I always come back."

"Your usual?" Theresa asked. Maxie nodded. "Coming right up. Have a seat."

Maxie scanned for open seats. The place wasn't packed today, which was a plus. The area, in what must have been a former breakfast nook, held her favorite table. Teresa and Judy both looked at each other, smiling. "You always take this table," Teresa told her as she brought out espresso and a chocolate croissant on a small plate, placing them before her.

"It's such a peaceful spot," Maxie replied. "I always love sitting here." The truth was that she liked to imagine the house as her own, not that she disliked her home. This one held a rustic quality. If nothing else, it was a nice place to escape from time to time.

Judy approached with a paper bag, placing it on the table. "For Señor Jameson," she said. "Must not forget him."

"You're so kind to remember," Maxie said, reaching for her espresso to take a sip. Fantastic coffee, she thought. It took her mind from the murders to thoughts of relaxing on her deck overlooking the canals.

For Maxie, moments like these allowed her to unwind and process the information percolating. Though the owners knew her and always fussed over her, she could remain anonymous, not bothered by anyone else. The chocolate croissant was a bonus.

A half-hour later, she was done. She never waited for the bill—had a vague idea of the pricing, always left a twenty-dollar bill on the table, more than enough for her espresso and snacks, along with a hefty tip. The small espresso spoon stopped it from blowing off. She grabbed the bag, turned to the women

as she walked out, and waved.

"Bye, Maxie," they both chimed.

Jameson met her back at the station. She had an actual office there, unlike other detectives with desks in the central area. This was because she had asked for one. It was a no-brainer. Maxie had solved more cases in her time on the force than most people. Her tenacity, style, and—despite ruffling some feathers of her colleagues—her open-ended way of dealing with the media, the public, and city officials, made her invaluable. When it came to Maxie, there were no limitations. Maxie could have whatever she wanted, not that she was demanding, nor did she take advantage of her status.

Maxie was astute. Professionally, personally, and financially. Wise investments in the stock market had netted her enough for a luxurious, two-story waterfront house on Padre Island, complete with a boat dock and her sailboat. She had named it: Lady Tears, had the name painted in gold lettering and outlined in black across the stern. The boat was a 1982 Bristol 40, centerboard/sloop, sleek, fast, with a shallow draft and a waterline length of twenty-seven and a half feet. Reddish-brown mahogany interior colors, a small galley, and room for a handful of people to sleep. She loved taking her out on the bay and hoisting sails after using the Westerbeke motor to first get out of the channel. Sailing offered a sense of peace rather than the convenience of just the engine.

She used the boat frequently, finding the change of scenery conducive to solving crime and schmoozing with everyone from the police chief, city council members, city mayors, and others seeking her counsel. It was her home away from home and her retreat. She could handle the sails alone and with relative ease, to a point where she considered herself proficient.

"He is in your office," Jameson told her as she walked in, handing him the small brown bag with his Danish inside. "I gave him a coffee." She nodded, strode past after casting him a 'you didn't give him that awful swill, did you?' look, then entered her corner office.

It had been painted a light peach, and she had decorated it with her two favorite things: tall, lush plants and ornaments with a nautical theme. On her desk, a small wooden sailboat served to remind her of her boat. A wooden inbox was now a tiny beach oasis; she added sand, shells, and a small plastic dolphin. Large paintings of various beach scenes, one with an abandoned wooden lifeboat and another with two images of pelicans, adorned the walls. It was less an office than a sanctuary. And she had left an open invitation for any other detectives needing a place to retreat, to use without asking permission, something that had ingratiated her with them even more than her charm. At least no one openly seemed to resent her for it.

Devin was sitting on one of the twin chairs by the desk, flipping through his phone messages. She closed the door.

"Mr. Parker, Maxie Michaels,"

she said, extending a hand for him to shake. “Thanks for coming in.” He started to stand, but she waved him back down, instead lifting the paper coffee cup and placing it on the opposite edge of the desk. “Trust me, you don’t want to drink this,” she said quietly.

Devin was in his late thirties, six feet tall, and muscular in the right places. He had a shock of dark hair that fell over his face—he swept it back. His eyes were a compelling, deep-blue color. “No one would tell me why I’m here.”

“I asked them to let me do that,” she said, pulling out her chair and sitting down. “I apologize. There’s no easy way for me to say this, but we found Curtis Delaney dead this morning.” She held out the business card they had retrieved from the body.

Devin’s face fell, the blood draining from the shock of what he had just heard. “Curtis...that’s not possible. I just spoke with him yesterday.”

“I am so sorry for your loss. We got your name from this card.” She flipped it over. “He carried it in his wallet. How exactly are you related?”

“We’re cousins. Long story. How...? What happened?” Devin could barely get the words out. His head felt suddenly waterlogged, and he could not clear his thoughts.

He hadn’t seen Curtis for some time, each promising to arrange a dinner or a weekend away fishing, but both were always extremely busy, and time mercilessly slipped by unnoticed.

Maxie sat upright and leaned closer, her hand reaching for the box of Kleenex she kept on the side of the desk, and moved it closer to him. Devin’s face, she noted, was frozen, and she knew he was struggling to process the information.

“Murdered,” she explained. “Blunt force to the back of the head.” She let it sink in for a moment. “Do you know anyone who would want to hurt him?”

Devin shook his head. “Curtis is...was...the most honest person I knew. He always treated everyone fairly.”

Maxie watched his expressions for any telltale signs of a lie or deception. There were none—he was genuinely distraught and caught off-guard, and she felt sorry for him, for the pain she knew he was experiencing. It never got any easier having to tell people that a loved one was dead, let alone murdered—that was the only news she delivered as a homicide detective.

“No enemies?”

“God, no,” Devin said.

“What line of work was he in—Stanton Investments. What is that?”

“Financial advisor. He was always good with money, finances, and stocks. He advised so many people where to put their money. He was considered somewhat of a genius with money.”

“Could someone have been seeking revenge for a bad investment?” Maxie asked.

Devin shook his head. “There were not many bad investments. People knew Curtis put his money

where his mouth was—he always invested where he advised his clients to invest. If they lost money, so did he. God, this is terrible." He put his face into his hands, felt the tears surging, and quickly grabbed a Kleenex, fighting them back.

"I am sorry," Maxie said. "I know this is difficult." She was sizing him up, noting how his body hunched over as he fought back the tears. She studied how he sat, what he wore—a tailored, open-collared shirt, high-quality cotton, and well-ironed, tailored slacks, Allen Edmonds Cap Toe Oxford shoes—stylish, she thought.

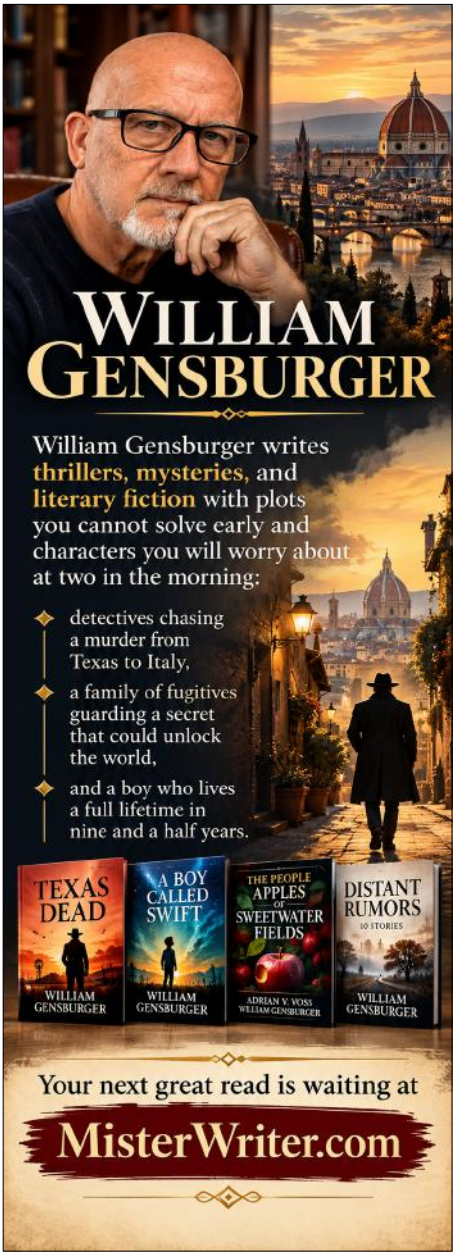
His mannerisms confirmed what her gut had already assessed: Devin Parker was not involved in the death of Curtis Delaney in any way. And this made her job much more straightforward—she would remove him from her suspect list rather than having to ferret out information had he been trying to be deceptive. "We'll talk more about Curtis later as I learn more, but now, I'm afraid I need to ask you to do something uncomfortable. I need you to positively identify the body for me. Can you do that?"

Devin's face answered the question. A look of horror—he would have to look upon the lifeless body of his cousin, let alone how he had been murdered. But he knew he had to do it—there was no other family to do so. He nodded slowly.

Maxie stood and came around to help him up. "Take a moment if you need it," she said softly.

He shook his head, brushed his hair back, and took a deep breath. "It's okay," he said. "There's no avoiding it. I'd rather get this done."

"Good," she said reassuringly. "We'll take my car—it's a short slog to the Medical Examiner's office."



THE LAST TIME
by John Grey

We're leaving the house
for the last time.

There's no one about.
The neighborhood
doesn't notice our departure.

One last traipse
through every room
has verified that nothing
of ours has been left behind.

At least, nothing physical.
Nothing I can touch.
But emotionally…
that's for the future to decide.

For now,
we've been too busy to reflect:
packing boxes,
shifting furniture,
scrubbing every wall and floor
so that it looks like
no one has ever lived here.

The new owners are on their way.
We could pass them on the street
and not even know it.

They'll move in
with their own stuff,
their own lives.

This is a house
of which we'll never again

ABOUT THE POET



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Midnight Mind, Willow Review and the Pennsylvania Literary Journal.

His latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon.

Work upcoming in the MacGuffin, the Bayou Review and Plainsongs.

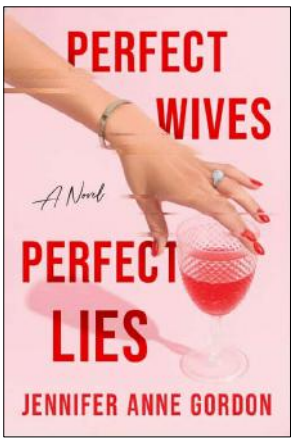


An Interview with
Jennifer Anne Gordon

Jennifer Anne Gordon is an award-winning author and podcast host. Her debut novel *Beautiful, Frightening and Silent* won the Kindle Book Award for Best Horror/Suspense for 2020, as well as the Best Horror Novel of the Year from the Authors on The Air Global Radio Network. Her novel *Pretty/Ugly* won the Helicon Award for Best Horror for 2022, and the Kindle Book Award for Best Novel of the Year 2022 (Reader's Choice). Her novelette *The Japanese Box* won the Lit Nastie Award for 2023 for Best Short Story, and her essay Navy Blue Dickies (Glassworks) is a Best of the Net Nominee for 2025.

1. When did you start writing?

I think, like most writers, I feel like I have always been writing something. My first writing memory was in third grade when I got a short "prayer for a cat" published in our little school newspaper. From there I wrote some Nightmare on Elm Street fan fiction in sixth grade—this was very embarrassing and honestly pretty gross. In seventh grade I would eat lunch in my English teacher's classroom and write short stories. I have dabbled in poetry over the years, a short foray into trying to write comics and graphic novels, and now I mainly write personal essays and novels… and the occasional short story.



2. Tell us about your published works. How did they come into being? What is your latest book about?

All of my published novels have come out in the same manner, when the story in my head gets too big, and it needs to come out. I start writing and see where it takes me. I joke that my first novel, Beautiful, Frightening, and Silent, took 20 years and 2 months to write…20 years of the story living in my head and eventually two months to write the first draft of the novel. My latest novel is a book club thriller called Perfect Wives, Perfect Lies. It is a

story about a woman who is still processing the grief of losing her son 11 years ago, and the only comfort she finds is in drinking cheap wine and pretending to be someone else online. She gets involved with a group of women on the internet and quickly gets in over her head with their cult-like connection. It's a story of female friendship, and toxic internet culture, and trauma. pan

3. Before you begin writing a book, do you already have the plot and characters mapped out in your mind, or does the story unfold as you write?

I usually have a vibe, or a rough concept. I let that simmer in my head for a while when I am trying to figure out who the story is about. To me, the character(s) are truly the most important aspect to any story, so once I figure out who they are, then I start writing. Usually this involves me discovering things about the character along the way. I am a *pantser*, so I don't have an outline to follow. Mostly I have scenes or flashes of scenes that I know need to happen, and then I try to figure out how to link those together and have it make sense.

4. Do you have any favorite authors? If yes, please tell us who they are and why they inspire you.

I have too many to mention and depending on my mood, they change. But the authors that have been my favorites as long as I can remember are Shirley Jackson, Anne Sexton, Josh Malerman, Sarah Langdon, Clay Mcleoud Chapman, Jennifer MacMahon, Stephen Graham Jones, May Cobb, Megan Collins, Rachel Harrison…the list goes on and on. They all inspire me in different ways. May, Rachel, and Megan are masters of twists and turns. I burn through their books so fast, and they are easily some of the most fun I ever have while reading. Josh, Jennifer, Sarah, Stephen, and Clay…they are masters of terrifying me while also breaking my heart.

5. When do you generally write? Do you follow a fixed schedule, or do you write whenever you feel inspired to put your thoughts into words?

I don't really have a fixed schedule, but I will usually keep the same schedule for an entire project. So, if I start to write a book during the afternoons, then I stick to afternoons for the duration of the project. It's where my muse can find me for that specific book. Maybe it's superstitious, maybe it's true. It's hard to say.

6. Was becoming an author a conscious decision?

When I sat down to write my first novel, I didn't think I would become a "full-time writer" so quickly but then the pandemic lockdown happened, and I lost my

job, and suddenly I had all the time in the world to try and make this happen. It had been something that I had always dreamed of doing but dreaming it and being it are very different things.

7. How do you balance writing with other responsibilities? What are your hobbies and interests apart from writing?

I am a ballroom dance instructor part-time; I also love photography and travel. I host a literary podcast, and I am still a very avid reader. My husband (Roman Sirotin) and I are also painters and we co-paint abstract mixed media paintings.

8. Tell us a little about your works in progress. Do you intend to become a full-time author?

I try not to talk too much about current projects; again, I am superstitious…But I will say that it is very slightly autobiographical, except in the work in progress there are a lot more murders than in my real life. Haha.

9. What would you like to say to budding authors who lose motivation when a few of their works do not perform well?

I would say they should try to remember why they started writing in the first place. To remember the joy in it. I know how hard this is, and it's all easier said than done. So, when this doesn't work, I encourage writers to try writing something completely new, maybe try a new genre or try writing flash. Even using writing prompts or taking a class or workshop has helped me in the past.

10. If there is one thing you would like to change in this world, what would it be?

If there was a way to eliminate cruelty, that would be the big one. I think that would cover most of the things I wish were different in this world.

11. What does a usual day in your life look like?

I have a dog, so truthfully most of my days revolve around him, his snacks, his walks, his play time.

12. If there is anything else you would like to share with our readers, please feel free to do so.

If anyone wants to know more about me or my work, and subscribe to my Substack (where I share personal essays) all of that information can be found on my website at http://www.JenniferAnneGordon.com

Interview courtesy of Literary Harbinger

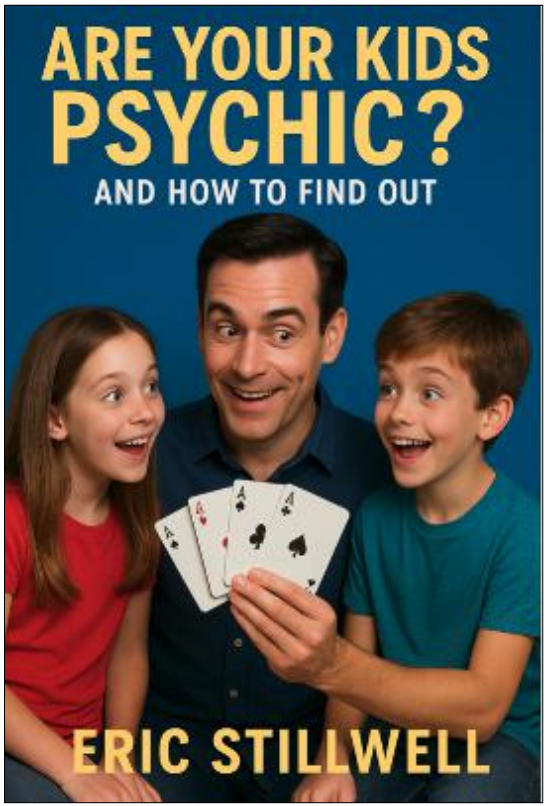
Are Your Kids PSYCHIC?

We all reportedly have extrasensory abilities, things we often discount as coincidence, luck, even synchronicity. Children have more because they have not yet been burdened by the rules of society and logical learning. Chances are that your children have some abilities that you can **easily test for** in the comfort of your home. **Eric Stillwell** shares more about this.

Credible Research

Psychical research emerged, led by groups like the Society for Psychical Research (founded in London, 1882). They studied telepathy, apparitions, and mediumship scientifically.

Famous figures: William Crookes, Frederic Myers, and later J.B. Rhine, who introduced controlled experiments in ESP and telekinesis at Duke University (1930s).



The U.S. and Soviet Union reportedly explored psychic research during the Cold War (e.g., remote viewing programs like Stargate Project).

Project Stargate was a CIA-funded and U.S. Army–supported effort, operating roughly from the early 1970s until its declassification in 1995. It investigated remote viewing, where individuals attempted to psychically perceive distant or hidden locations, events, or objects. The impetus for Stargate came in part from intelligence reports that the Soviet Union was pursuing similar psychic research.

Notably, researchers Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, based at

the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), led many of the experiments. Subjects, including the renowned Ingo Swann—coiner of the term "remote viewing"—participated in controlled trials aimed at validating psychic abilities.

Experiments included "beaconing" methods: a "sender" viewed a target image, while a remote viewer attempted to describe or sketch it. Some participants reportedly achieved startlingly accurate descriptions, including layout details, code words, or other intelligence-related data.

Major General Albert Stubblebine, commander of U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM) in the early 1980s, was a fervent advocate for psychic phenomena and even demanded that commanders learn spoon-bending like psychic Uri Geller. He pushed ideas like invisibility and psychokinesis in soldiers—though his attempts (like walking through walls) failed.

Psychic ability might be an inherent but **latent aspect of consciousness**, accessible when the mind transcends normal sensory filtering. By cultivating awareness through meditation, intuition practice, and altered states, humans may tap into a wider reality field where these abilities become natural expressions.

An even simpler explanation is that we are biological creatures living in a biological world that is interconnected on so many levels we take for granted. Whether the fact that an extensive mycelium network runs underground connecting trees and plants, or the sensory perceptions of animals, or how a dog knows you are a kind person or not, there is much evidence for something greater than ourselves.

Children have not been indoctrinated at an early age and, as such, are open to many things.

If you know that your child was naturally psychic, wouldn't you want to ensure that they could maximize this gift rather than bury it in our societal trap?

THE EXPERIMENT

You can test your children's abilities at home using a simple deck of playing cards.

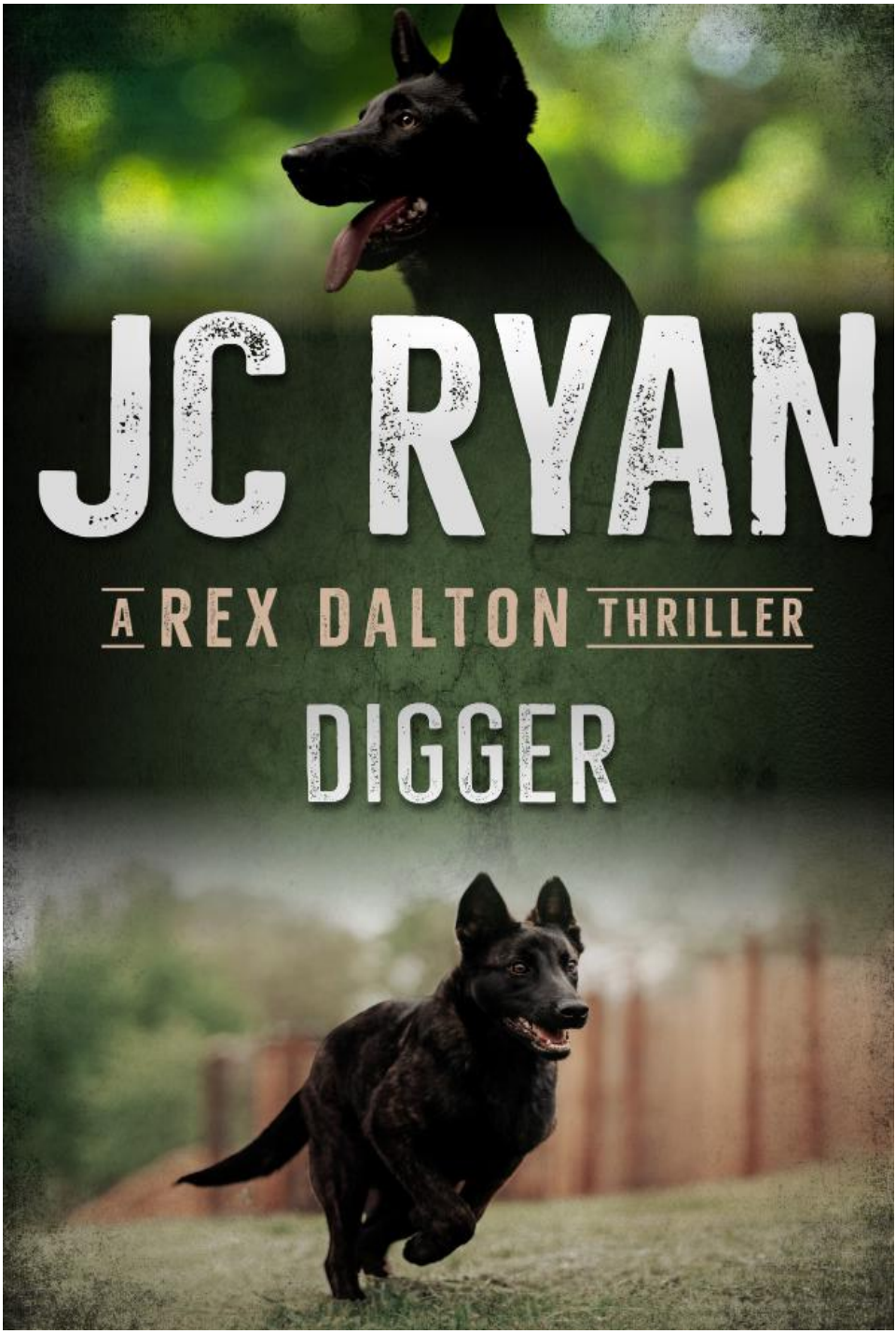
Kids enjoy this game and especially after they see the results. But the process requires a certain process, not just guessing cards. The idea is to release their inner ability.

Now, if I say what are the odds of guessing a coin toss you would say 50-50. But f I could show you that probability can be skewed to 80-20, would you consder that remarkable?

If I can show you how your children can guess this aspect of the playing cards over 80% of the time, would you concede that more than luck is at play?

And if you discovered that your children possesed an extra sensory perception would you encourage it to develop fully?

Learn the test and what you can do about it in this book. $1.99 on Amazon (FREE if you have Kindle Unlimited.) https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FNLPBS2P


JC RYAN
A REX DALTON THRILLER
DIGGER

An Excerpt from
Digger
by JC Ryan

Kabul, Afghanistan

Phoenix Unlimited Compound

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REX DALTON SAT ACROSS the table from Trevor, as far from the damn dog as he could get and still hear Trevor in the noisy little dive where they'd gone for dinner. He wasn't sure Trevor's suggestion that the food here was even better than that in the compound mess was accurate. But they'd already ordered, and Trevor was bragging about his dog again.

"… most dogs wouldn't have recognized the danger if they'd been raised in a kennel like Digger was and had never seen a snake before. How did Digger know?" Trevor finished.

Rex had lost track of the story, but he'd heard it before. Trevor and Digger had been posted to some obscure nation occupying half of an island in the Indonesian Archipelago. He'd been on patrol in the jungle when all of a sudden Digger darted in front of him and refused to let him pass. Trevor scanned the sides of the path for danger in the underbrush, almost missing the green pit viper until it darted across the path about one stride from where Digger had stopped him. Rex didn't know the answer to Trevor's question any more than he'd known it the first five or so times Trevor had told him the story. It was getting old.

One of the other guys from the crew must have had the same thought. "Hey, Trev, watch the movies; there's no Superdog in the story. Clark Kent only had a girlfriend, and she couldn't even recognize him when he had his glasses on."

Trevor was unfazed; he didn't mind the ribbing. A natural storyteller, he knew how to capture an audience, milk them for free beer, and when to deliver the punchline. He was a self-described good-natured bloke, a little taller than Rex, blond, blue-eyed, and

good-looking in that typical Aussie way. Not that he looked anything like that when they were in the field. He'd put temporary color in his hair, wear contacts, and add some bronzer to his already tan complexion, and in native costume, also known as man jammies, he'd pass as a local as easily as Rex did.

In Rex's experience, Trevor was also a highly competent Australian SAS operative. He had to admit to Digger being a highly valuable asset as well. At 5'11" with penetrating dark eyes, black hair, tan skin, the physique of a gymnast, and a stern-looking facial expression, Rex was not movie star attractive but certainly a very handsome specimen. He worked for an Arizona-based organization, Crisis Response Consultancy, CRC, a private military contractor specializing in black operations on behalf of their clients such as the CIA and other US security agencies under the command of John Brandt, the Old Man. The name, Crisis Response Consultancy, was one of those nondescript names that simultaneously said nothing and everything about the activities of the organization. You had to be one of them to know what crises they were consulted about and how they responded to them. CRC was a Black Ops organization.

Rex and Trevor first met in Islamabad, Pakistan, on a mission where Trevor and Digger had been assigned to Rex's team to help clear a compound of potential innocents before they raided it. It was only later, when the humans had become friends, that Rex had learned how Trevor directed the dog on complex missions. Digger was outfitted with special gear that included a camera hidden in the fur between his ears, which wirelessly transmitted to a wrist-mounted iPad so Trevor could see what Digger saw, and a wireless comms unit inside each ear that picked up Trevor's sotto voce commands. At the time, Rex couldn't believe his eyes as the dog performed a series of room searches seemingly of his own volition. He'd compounded that astonishing feat at the end of the raid when he saved another member of the squad by

preventing a sneak attack from the rear. Digger's obvious vicious hatred of the enemy combatant had convinced Rex that he was as dangerous as he appeared to be. Smart, yes. Absolutely. Would he rip a person's throat out, given the chance? It sure seemed like that to Rex, who made sure the dog never got the chance at his own throat. They had a truce because of their mutual regard for Trevor. They didn't have to like each other.

Trevor started his military career in the Royal Australian Infantry Corps, from where he tried out for the Special Air Service Regiment, SASR, commonly known as the SAS. He passed the grueling selection and, because of his love of dogs, specialized as a war dog handler. That was when he and Digger got teamed up and trained. Said training included, among others, a stint with the Military Police and their K9 unit.

When Rex and Trevor had met and become friends despite Rex's distrust of the dog, Digger seemed to reciprocate Rex's opinion. He growled every time Rex got near, which Rex avoided as much as possible. Trevor ribbed him that normally he'd trust the dog's judgment, but he'd had good reports about Rex, so he'd overruled his partner and accepted Rex at face value. After that, he was always making silly excuses for the dog's behavior, puzzled about it because everyone knew dogs were excellent judges of character. Even though Digger and Rex had achieved détente of sorts, the dog clearly still had a problem with his alpha's friend. Rex could have set Trevor straight on why, but he didn't. He had his reasons.

And apparently, so had Digger, but he seemed to enjoy pestering Rex too much to let anyone know what his reasons were.

The heckler, Jake Gibbs, was not happy that his gibes didn't have the desired effect on Trevor—he kept on challenging Digger's Superdog image and managed to influence two more of their buddies to question Digger's alleged prowess.

Finally, Trevor responded. "Better just hope you never get on his bad side, mate. Take my

advice; when Digger is around, don't commit a crime, he'll track you down and bring you to justice."

"Yeah, right. I can't wait to hear this one."

Trevor shook his head and grinned. "When he was just a trainee, he earned a commendation for tracking down a bad guy leading to a conviction for murder. You've never met or even heard of a dog this intelligent. Of that, I'm certain, and I can prove it."

"I've got twenty bucks that says, 'No way.'"

"Tell you what. I'll give you the story, and if you agree you've never met a dog this smart, you'll treat him to his favorite kebab dish. Once a day for two weeks straight."

"You and Superdog are on. And if I'm not as impressed as you think I'll be, you'll owe me two bottles of Scotch, right?"

"That's a deal, mate. But telling this story is thirsty work. I'll start telling as soon as you put a beer in front of me, and I'll keep on telling as long as you and your cohorts keep a beer in front of me."

In short order, Gibbs had ordered the beer and the proprietor placed it in front of Trevor.

"The first thing you have to understand is that Aussie war dogs are cross-trained. While your American dogs are specialists, ours are trained in everything from search and rescue to bomb and drug detection. That's one reason we pick the smartest breeds. Border collies and poodles are said to be smarter, but shepherds are plenty smart, too. They're also big enough to intimidate, they're strong, and they've got other qualities that make them the best breed for our Special Forces. When I say shepherds, that includes German, Belgian, Malinois, and Dutch shepherds like Digger here. I'd add that Digger has exceptional judgment, and he's versatile. I can train him to do almost anything, including turning doorknobs and infiltrating buildings."

"Of course, and he would also cook your food, wash the dishes, and take out the trash, right?"

Trevor just shook his head.

Gibbs was in for a rude awakening.

Rex shifted in his seat and glanced at Digger, who'd raised his head when Trevor mentioned his name and stared straight at him before going back to working on his favorite toy, which Rex remembered was called a Kong. The oddly shaped object was made of hard rubber with a hole drilled into the center. Trevor often stuffed peanut butter or meat inside to keep Digger occupied. Tonight, it seemed to be a revolting combination of peanut butter and meat. Revolting to Rex, that is. Digger apparently relished it. He had pounced on the erratically bouncing toy when Trevor dropped it for him, captured it between his paws, and retreated under the table to lick the contents out. His teeth were terrifyingly large as he snapped at the air to work the peanut butter out of them.

Trevor had once persuaded Rex to hand Digger the toy, but it was all he could do to hold his hand still while Digger, to Rex's surprise, delicately took it from him, though he fully expected to lose the hand.

Rex didn't want to interrupt the story, or for that matter, admit to being afraid of the dog, but he kept a wary eye on the story's star as Trevor went on telling one he hadn't heard before.

"So, I'd just been through initial training at Dog Force in Falls Creek, New South Wales, and I'd brought Digger back with me to Oakey for further special ops training. It was as much training for me and the other dog handlers in the unit as for Digger and the other dogs.

"Sometimes, we'd be called out in the middle of the night for an exercise with no warning. That night, I thought that's what it was when an MP sergeant roused me and my bunkmate, Rory, and told us to get our dogs and our asses into the transport waiting over at the duty officer's office.

"We first suspected it was unusual when they took us off base. It only took a couple minutes to get into town and to the closest pub to the base. I recognized the place where we all went to drink when we were off duty. The driver told us to

stay in the vehicle until we were called. Rory and I were obviously wondering what we were doing there.

"MPs sometimes worked and trained with local law enforcement, but it was usually for things like crowd control and such. Rory asked what if it was some bloke from the base that caused trouble in the tavern. I said, or maybe it was the other way round; some bloke from the base who was the victim.

"We quit speculating when they let us out of the transport and into the pub. There was a man spread-eagled on the floor. A pool of blood had spread out all around him. His throat looked like a jackal had been at him. He was very dead. The place was almost empty, except for police and the proprietor, who was sitting on one of the barstools looking like he'd just lost his last few meals and holding a blood-stained bar towel around one arm. Our commanding officer was already there. He stepped forward when he saw us enter and explained.

'"The bartender says it was one of our guys. Got into a dust-up with a local, and the next thing he knew, the soldier had smashed his beer bottle against the edge of a table and was waving it around. The bartender tried to break it up and got slashed for his trouble. Some townies were closing in on him when he jabbed the bottle into this guy's neck and swung it across, hard. He ran while everyone else was trying to stop the bleeding. The victim bled out in less than a minute.

'"The Medical Examiner is on his way, so we don't know the exact cause of death, but I'd say it's pretty obvious; either his jugular or carotid was severed.'

"He went on to say it didn't matter. What mattered was that we caught our guy before the townsfolk did. Public lynching is not an Aussie thing, but there's always a first time for everything. Even though they all saw it happen, there needed to be a trial and due process. No one knew where the weapon was. It hadn't been found in the pub, so they surmised the killer must have taken it with him. And it would be the key in the court-martial because no one in the pub at

the time knew the suspect's name. And looking at all the empty glasses and bottles on the tables, it was evident that a lot of alcohol had been consumed that night. Which explained why the description of the assailant varied enough it could have been almost any male Aussie between their mid-twenties and mid-thirties. We needed to find the weapon and the suspect and tie them together beyond all shadow of a doubt. Otherwise, every man on the base would be a suspect, and if we couldn't get justice for the victim, no soldier would be welcome or safe in town for a very long time.

"It was enough incentive for us. But could the dogs do it?"

Biggs snorted loudly and took a long swig of his beer.

"Maybe the job should have been turned over to more experienced handlers, but the base had just graduated the previous cohort, and the small permanent contingent was out on another mission. We were it. We tried not to see the doubt on the sergeant's face or, speaking for myself, feel the doubt in my gut. But that was one thing they drilled into us from the first day; you must trust your dog. They've got more brains in their paws than you dumbasses have in your heads. Right then, I believed Digger was probably smarter than me anyway."

"If you ask me, he probably still is." Gibbs couldn't let the opportunity pass.

The rest of the men exploded in laughter.

Trevor paused to take a deep draught of his beer, making a face and an obscene comment about missing real beer. The black-market stuff available in this hole-in-the-wall was warm, weak, and tasted like warmed-over piss. Rex thought it was better than tea or any other alternative but said nothing. He glanced at Digger and took relief in the dog's closed eyes and soft snores, indicating he was sound asleep. Not so the other members of the unit who'd been listening to the story. They'd crowded around closer and were sitting in various postures of anticipation. Even Gibbs and his fellow scoffers.

Trevor took another swallow,

and someone muttered, "What happened? Is he going to tell the rest?" Some of the others shushed him. "Let him tell it his way."

Trevor's beer was done. The owner placed another in front of him.

When the tension hit the level Trevor had been waiting for, he took up the story. "It turned out the suspect hadn't touched anything in the room that the proprietor could point out. Rory commanded his K9 to 'find it,' and the dog went sniffing around the place until he reached the puddle of blood. Rory had to restrain her from licking at it. The MP sarge snapped at him to get his dog under control before she contaminated the scene. I kept Digger on a short leash as I had him seeking a scent, too. It was almost unfair. Neither dog knew which scent we wanted them to focus on. But Digger sniffed around the proprietor and then put his nose in the air and sort of circled his head around. Then he gave the alert indication, sitting facing the door, and I opened it and gave him the Kooba command. He took off like a shot, dragging me with him until I let the leash out a bit."

"Say, what? Kooba command, what the hell is that?" This time it was one of the other skeptics in the audience.

"Yes, 'Kooba' is a derivative of the Aboriginal Noongar word 'koodadjinong,' meaning 'seek' or 'understand.' So, we teach our dogs and puppies to 'find it' if a specific object or human scent is nearby. Once they've located the scent, we can give a 'seek' or 'Kooba' command. For example: if the dog indicates a threat has stopped at the door like Digger did that night, the handler can say 'Kooba,' and the dog will follow the 'scent track' until commanded otherwise or finds his target."

"So let me see if I have this straight," said Johnson, one of the disbelievers, "you're saying you didn't give Digger anything belonging to the suspect to smell at and then told him to Kooba, find the man?"

"Right."

"So, he arrived there after the fact, has never seen the

culprit, wasn't given a clue in the form of an object belonging to the attacker, yet he figured it all out by sniffing the air?"

"Precisely," said Trevor with a slight grin on his face.

"I like science fiction stories," chuckled Gibbs. "Remember, I only drink Skrewball Peanut Butter Whiskey—"

"Peanut butter and whiskey?" Trevor was incredulous.

"Yep, nothing more American than that," said Gibbs.

"Made exclusively for screwballs, I presume?"

Trevor continued when the laughter subsided. "Digger's nose was down, and he was pulling on the lead strongly. I knew he was following a strong scent. Later, I realized the guy had shed a lot of adrenaline because of what he'd done and because of the running. That's what Digger picked up on at first, but then he'd picked up the trail of shed skin cells—"

"Wait a minute," Clerk, another doubter, interrupted. "Are you trying to tell us the suspect's skin was falling off? What the hell, man! Was he some kind of reptile?"

Trevor smirked as he responded. "Everyone is dropping skin cells all the time. Even a dork like you. About thirty to forty thousand of them a minute. We don't notice it, but the dogs can smell them and follow the track. You didn't think they were looking at footprints, did you?"

Gibbs and his gang made no reply. Probably realizing they were being taken to school to learn things about dogs they'd never heard of.

Trevor looked around as if to challenge anyone else to contradict him, but everyone was hanging on to the story, so he shrugged and kept on going.

"As soon as we cleared the door, Digger turned right and right again, leading me toward the rear of the pub, through the car park, and into an unpaved area behind the pub toward some trees, where he veered left. He pulled me about fifteen meters and then stopped, lifted his nose, and looked back at me. He cocked his head, you know, like when a dog is curious about something. We hadn't been partnered long, but

I recognized that gesture. He was asking me if I wanted him to explore something interesting."

"Stop right there, mister. Hold your horses," said Gibbs. "Now you want us to believe Digger can speak English or Aussie or whatever it is you speak Down Under?"

"Shut up, Gibbs," said one of the guys. "Obviously, it's just a figure of speech. Let Trev talk. I'm intrigued."

"I'm not," said Gibbs and took a large gulp of his lukewarm beer. His doubting Thomas buddies nodded in agreement.

"I was torn," continued Trevor. "He'd been following the trail confidently, so I was sure he wasn't telling me the suspect went in that direction. Besides, the cover thinned in that direction, and I could see we weren't that far from the pub. It didn't seem he'd go that way. But Digger seemed to think whatever was in that direction was important, so I gave him the 'find it' command, and he took off again, this time sniffing the air. We'd gone only four meters or so when Digger stopped, sat down, and mates, I'd swear he grinned at me!"

'That's it. Now the damn dog smiles," snapped Gibbs. "It's not enough that he can reconstruct a crime scene; he can sniff the air and tell who did it. He talks to his handler, and now he smiles. C'mon, guys, how much longer are you going to allow this farce to continue? Madigan, you owe me two bottles of whiskey."

"Shut up!" Shouted everyone in chorus.

Trevor sat back and crossed his arms, obviously waiting for the inevitable questions. Everyone shouted at once, "What did he find? What was it? Come on, don't leave us hanging." Trevor let his face relax into a cocky grin and answered, "Would you believe he found the weapon?"

"You've spouted so much bullshit already; why not add a few more dung heaps?" Gibbs just couldn't help himself.

"Well," Trevor answered. "Believe it or not, he sat down, right next to the top of a broken beer bottle, with what looked like blood on the jagged

edges. And when I bent down to pick it up, he reminded me to put on gloves first."

"He did not!" This came not only from Gibbs but from several other men in the crowd.

By this time, the café owner had joined the crowd and was listening just as raptly. He must have understood some English.

"Yes, he did. I bent down and reached toward it, and he grabbed my hand in his mouth, careful not to bite me, and growled a little. Let me tell you, I was embarrassed! And then I didn't think that he was smarter than I was anymore; I knew he was."

"Of course, he was and still is. I could've told you that," said Gibbs.

Trevor looked at Gibbs. "So, you're still not ready to admit you've never met a dog as smart as mine?"

"Of course not. You can't expect me to believe a man who, by his own admission, is outwitted by a dog. You've got a lot more convincing to do before you'll make a believer out of me."

Trevor chuckled like he'd known all along he was going to have to finish that story or take a beating.

Rex grinned, too. As far as he could tell, Trevor was enjoying drawing out the story and having his drinks paid for, too.

"Well, I pulled some gloves from my duty belt and put them on, picked up the bottle, put it in a plastic bag from my backpack, and tagged it with how and where we'd found it, all the chain-of-custody stuff. Put it in my backpack and directed Digger back to where we'd left the suspect's trail. He picked it right up and kept going under those trees until we came to Oakey Creek. I didn't know the name of it right then; I hadn't been at the base long enough to get real familiar with the town. I thought that would be where we lost the trail, but no, Digger went right into the water.

"I wasn't sure how deep it was, and I didn't want to get the evidence wet, so I called Digger back—"

"Here it comes, gentlemen. That dog is now going to walk on water," interjected Clerk.

"Almost, but not quite," said Trevor. "I took the lead off him and followed along on the bank as he swam right down the center of the creek. When he got out on the opposite bank, I knew I was in trouble. I'd have to cross the creek after all or risk losing Digger, who was still off his lead. I called him to come back, but he sat down and barked. There wasn't any choice for me. I had to backtrack until I came to a spot where there were some overhanging trees and rocks sitting high in the water. I hoped I could cross there without getting the evidence in my backpack wet. I figured Digger's bark meant, 'Hurry up. I'll wait here for you.'"

"Of course, that's what it meant. He speaks English. Did you forget about that?" Said Johnson.

Trevor ignored that. "I was sweating bullets by the time I followed the opposite bank to where Digger sat, right where I'd left him. He woofed at me like he was saying, 'What took you so long?' And then, before I had the chance to get the lead back on him, he turned and headed northwest along the creek bank. The trees and scrub were intermittent, and Digger took some interest in the lower branches and brambles. When there was open ground, he'd take to the water again and come back out again when there was tree cover. I reckoned the suspect was swimming when he had little cover. Once, Digger crossed the creek, and I lost sight of him in the cover on the other side, but he was only a few meters farther up when he appeared again and crossed some shallow rapids, back to the side where I was waiting. He stopped and looked back at me, so I ran to catch up, and as soon as I was within a meter, he turned back into the water and swam down the side nearby.

"We covered about half a kilometer in that way from the spot where Digger first went into the water, and then he clambered out of the water a final time, shook himself dry, and followed a dirt path until we came to a road. Digger sat down and waited for me there, so I took the opportunity to put his lead back on to avoid scaring the townsfolk when we walked down a street that was

residential on one side and what smelled like a dairy on the other.

"By then, it was nearly two in the morning. I radioed our commanding officer to have someone meet me and take custody of the evidence in case I had to cross that creek again. Digger was leading me west on the macadam, and when I described where we were and where we'd been, the driver jumped into the comms to say we'd be coming up on Cory Street and to wait for him at that intersection. I requested he hurry the hell up so some armed citizen didn't take exception to a prowler on their property. We'd heard a few dogs barking as we passed, but Digger was in mission mode—he stayed quiet."

Gibbs sighed loudly.

"The vehicle pulled up before I'd been sitting too long on the roadside, making myself and Digger as small a target as possible. I handed over the broken beer bottle and continued to let Digger lead me along. We still had to catch the suspect. I was surprised when Digger followed the vehicle after it turned around and went back northeast the way it had come. We lost view of it before too long. The road made a slight angle farther east—the suspect was making for the base."

Trevor stopped, took the last swig of his beer, made another face, and said, "That's enough for tonight, boys. I've had enough of this sewerage water for one night. I'm for bed."

The listeners set up such a racket that the owner had to shout for them to be quiet. Despite their protests, Trevor was adamant that he needed his beauty sleep. He'd finish the story the next night if anyone was interested.

Gibbs insisted he wasn't yet convinced, so Trevor shrugged. "I told you not to get on his bad side. I can't be responsible for the consequences." Gibbs just laughed.

Trevor woke Digger, who stood, did a downward dog as if he was a yoga practitioner, stretched his back legs, then his forelegs, and took up his position at Trevor's heel. Trevor spoke his name, and the dog looked up at him. "See these

blokes?" he said, indicating Gibbs and his buddies. "They don't think you're the smartest dog they've ever met. If you show them you are, that one's going to buy you kebabs every day for fourteen days in a row. But he isn't convinced yet."

Digger looked at Gibbs, cocked his head slightly, and gave a soft growl.

"He's warning you; you'd better pay up soon, mate." Trevor laughed loudly and led Digger out of the café and toward the compound. "Same place, same time tomorrow, mate. Bring money."

Rex followed his friend and lengthened his stride to catch up, careful to keep Trevor between him and Digger at all times. "Is that story you're telling really true?" Digger growled again, but Rex didn't think he really understood the question. He was just reacting, as always, to Rex's presence.

Trevor answered, "What do you think?"

"I think it may be exaggerated," Rex replied.

"Not one bit, mate. Not one bit. See you tomorrow?"

"You know it."

"Have a good one."

"You too."

The next night Rex was late to the café where everyone was waiting for the rest of the story. The lead heckler, Gibbs, wasn't there. Trevor told the others they had to wait for him. "I'm not telling it twice." There were a few grumbles, but no one pressed the matter. It was well past ten in the evening when Gibbs showed. He apologized that he'd been detained unavoidably.

Rex and Trevor occupied their favorite table, tucked in a corner where Digger could sleep under the table unnoticed, and Rex could watch one direction while Trevor watched the other.

Rex had asked Trevor once how he got away with having the dog in the café. Eyes twinkling, Trevor had said he had an 'arrangement' with the proprietor. Apparently, the first time he'd come in, the proprietor told him Digger had to stay outside. He had sent Digger outside, then ordered a beer. When it came, he called

Digger in with a whistle, and he came in and slunk under the table. It took a while for the proprietor to notice, but when he did, he was so mad Trevor could hardly follow his Arabic. Trevor had let him wind down and then calmly asked if it was legal for him to serve beer. After that, there'd never been a problem, and eventually, the proprietor had come to like Digger and sometimes tossed him a treat.

They'd ordered their second round, and Trevor was lifting a surprisingly cool bottle to his lips, when Gibbs approached the table. "I'm surprised you aren't running your mouth about your dog. When are you going to tell us the rest of the story?"

Trevor perked up, whatever funk he'd fallen into broken, and grinned his trademark cocky grin. "Now's as good a time as any. Where was I?"

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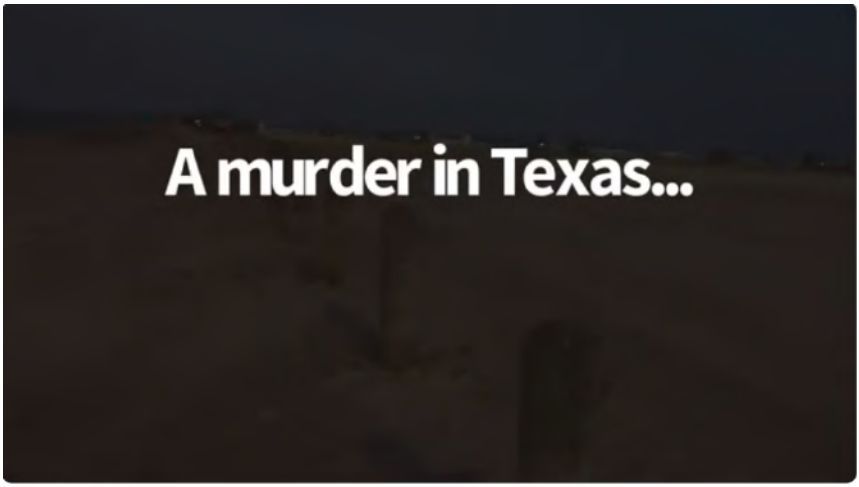

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