

crime

The joy of ... a killer plot

Marcel Berlins follows a bloody trail of bodies — from South Africa to South London

City of Blood
by M. D. Villiers

Harvill Secker, 341pp
£12.99 * £10.99; e-book £13.56

Joyland
by Stephen King

Hard Case Crime, 283pp
£7.99 * £7.59

* The Distinguished Assassin
by Nick Taussig

Dissident, 317pp
£12.99 * £11.69

The Dying Hours
by Mark Billingham

Little, Brown, 387pp
£16.99 * £14.99; e-book £8.49

Natural Causes
by James Oswald

Penguin, 441pp
£7.99 * £7.59; e-book £2.99

The Hanging
by Løtte and Søren Hammer
trans. Ebba Segerberg

Bloomsbury, 298pp

The city of blood of M. D. Villiers's terrific debut is today's Johannesburg, where the elimination of apartheid has not been accompanied by peace on the streets. Casual violence, gang warfare and frequent killings are the norm. The police have little chance of curtailing the mayhem, a lot of which arises from tension between locals and illegal immigrants. Siphwe Modise, a bright 19-year-old orphan living in a homeless shelter, sees a Nigerian gangster stab a woman selling mangos; he goes to help her and is threatened by the perpetrator demanding his silence and by the police who want him to reveal what he saw. Siphwe is an original hero. Secondary characters — Grace, who runs the hostel, and Adrian the white cop — are exceptionally well drawn, and the city's vibrant, exciting, dangerous atmosphere is superbly portrayed.

Stephen King decided that *Joyland* should be available only as a printed book, partly to help bookshops, but also so that the novel is read as if it was in pulp-fiction format, with a garishly coloured cover showing a scantily clad woman. Surprisingly, the device works. A mood is created that would not have been achieved by way of e-book and Kindle. A naive student, recently jilted, takes a job in a small, struggling carnival where various strange things happen, not least the apparition of a girl who'd been



IAN REID / GETTY

range King but immensely readable.

The Distinguished Assassin is Professor Aleksei Klebnikov, banished to a Gulag labour camp in 1949 on trumped-up charges. Set free in 1952, he becomes a hitman for a gangster, assigned to murder six brutal, highly placed Communist officials. Klebnikov's ultimate aim is to kill the man responsible for his captivity and who, he believes, seduced his wife in his absence. The story is told in alternate chapters covering his time as prisoner and after his release. Through Klebnikov, the plight of the Russian people under Stalinist rule is grippingly demonstrated. Taussig's style — short on dialogue and long on

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descriptions and Klebnikov's thoughts — takes a bit of getting used to, but turns out to be effective for the passionate political and emotional content of his novel.

It's as if Philip Marlowe had decamped to Bognor, or Poirot to Mogadishu. In *The Dying Hours*, policeman Tom Thorne has made, in his eyes, an even more extreme journey — from North to South London. It was not voluntary. Readers of *Good as Dead* will recall that he rather messed up that incident. He's been demoted, shorn of his detective status, forced to wear a uniform like a mere cop, and to live and work south of the river. He's part of a team that investigates an apparent suicide, then others. He believes that, despite different modes of death, they are disguised murders ... and linked. None of his colleagues agrees so he makes his own inquiries, without permission.

Only after the self-published *Natural Causes* became a huge success did author James Oswald, following many refusals, find a real publisher who paid him real money. It's a well-plotted police procedural, set in Edinburgh, featuring the sympathetic if not intriguing Detective Inspector Tony McLean. The eviscerated body of a girl is discovered in a sealed room when workmen demolish a house. Her organs have been put in six glass jars. She was killed 60 years before. A succession of respectable men are being murdered in Edinburgh. McLean believes the events, six decades apart, are connected. A good read, which yet again confirms the adage that nobody knows anything when it comes to predicting whether a book will be a bestseller or a flop.

The Hanging, by a Danish brother and sister, is being much praised by Nordic crime fiction aficionados. This is the first of their novels to be translated into English. The bodies of five naked men are found hanging in a school gym. Detective Inspector Konrad Simonsen and his team seek the connections. Other deaths follow. This serious, complex novel raises disturbing issues but the

CARNIVAL TIME
Stephen King's new
novel is set in a
mysterious funfair