

CAPITAL CRIMES

BY PATRICK SMITH

What is a better place to set a crime story than Washington, D.C.? There, the jokes write themselves.

Whether in Capitol Hill's hallowed halls or just inside the Beltway, an area once known as the "Murder Capital of the World" ("Outside of the killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country," embattled former mayor Marion Barry is once purported to have said), the settings are historically significant, picturesque, and deadly.

But capital crime encompasses much more than just the usual suspects. Many of us immediately think of James Patterson (the Alex Cross series); Brad Meltzer (*The Tenth Justice* [1998], *The First Council* [2001], *The Book of Fate* [2006]); David Baldacci (*Absolute Power* [1996], *The Simple Truth* [1999], *The Camel Club* [2005]); and Dan Brown (*The Lost Symbol* [2009]). These writers have certainly put their stamp on the city. Whether in stand-alone novels or in series ranging from Margaret Truman's police procedurals set in and around famous landmarks or in the gritty, often racially charged stories far removed from the glitz and glamour of government rainmakers in the novels of first-rank crime writer George Pelecanos, the city exerts a magnetic attraction on writers and readers alike.

As for the tales of political intrigue that make Washington, D.C., a target-rich environment for great nonfiction? Well, you couldn't make this stuff up.

FICTION

The Room and the Chair

By Lorraine Adams (2010)



Novelist, critic, and Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* journalist Lorraine Adams explored terrorism and the experience of Algerian immigrants to the United States in her award-winning debut novel, *Harbor* (2004). *The Room and the Chair* offers frightening and all-too-real insight into our present. If the inner workings of Washington and the practice of journalism within the nation's capital appeal to you, don't miss this one. (★★★★ May/June 2010)

THE STORY: When fighter pilot Mary Goodwin is ejected from a jet over the Potomac River after 9/11, she is badly injured, and the accident is quickly hushed up. But the story reaches the *Washington Spectator*, where the night editor and rookie reporter Vera Hastings suspects that the crash might have been part of a covert spy operation. Others, including Will Holmes, head of a secret intelligence program, are determined to conceal the truth. As the action moves from Washington to Afghanistan, Iraq, Dubai, and Iran, a disturbing tale of government secrecy and Washington-style journalism—always compelling, not always honest—emerges.

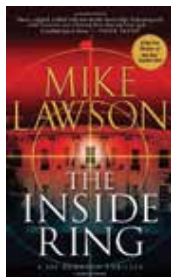
"The Room and Chair is a breed apart: a novel that combines the meticulous reportage of Bernstein and Woodward's *All the President's Men* (1974) with the spellbinding poetry and creepy political intrigue of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946). ... Then, too, there is her vivisection of life inside the newsroom—"The Room"—of a Washington paper: nothing less than a minor miracle of social anthropology." KIRK DAVIS

SWINEHART, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*, 3/5/10

The Inside Ring

A Joe DeMarco Thriller

By Mike Lawson (2005)



After an auspicious start, the Joe DeMarco series numbers eight installments with the recent publication of *House Odds* (2013). Worth reading for the auxiliary characters alone—Lawson's Speaker of the House John Fitzgerald Mahoney, a delightfully corrupt and surprisingly moral Boston politician of the old stripe (readers, make your own inferences), anchors the books throughout—Lawson's series should be far better known than it is. DeMarco, who starts out as a likable, flawed hero, only gets more complex in subsequent titles. Think Lee Child's Jack Reacher inside the Beltway.

THE STORY: When an assassination attempt on the president claims the lives of his best friend and a Secret Service agent, an intense manhunt immediately turns up a slam-dunk suspect. Things are more complicated than they seem, of course, and a far-reaching conspiracy involving the Secret Service takes shape when Andrew Banks, Secretary of Homeland Security, admits that he was warned of the attempt beforehand. Enter Joe DeMarco, a clientless Washington, D.C., lawyer with a past who works—off the books—at the behest of the Speaker of the House, a man no stranger to getting his way—even in the shark-infested waters of Capitol Hill. The two will need to call in some favors if they want to clear the Secret Service's reputation—and to stop the killers who infiltrated the inside ring.

"In this remarkably assured debut, private investigator Joe DeMarco discovers that one of the Secret Service agents guarding the President could have been involved in a plot to assassinate him. ... Mike Lawson shows every understanding of the skills required of a thriller writer to keep a reader fully engaged and utterly thrilled." MATTHEW LEWIN, *GUARDIAN* (UK), 1/28/06

See also *The Second Perimeter* (2006), *House Secrets* (2009), *House Divided* (2011), and *House Odds* (2013).

Executive Privilege

By Phillip Margolin (2008)

Until recently better known for his many solid police and courtroom procedurals set in and around Portland, Oregon, Phillip Margolin struck gold with his Washington Trilogy: *Supreme Justice* (2010) and *Capitol Murder* (2012) follow this first volume—featuring Dana Cutler and Brad Miller. Margolin's breakneck plots have consistently put his work on the best seller list for two decades, and he brings that energy and a local's love of Washington, D.C., (the author has a degree from American University) to bear on his latest novels.

THE STORY: During the filing of a routine pro bono appeal for Oregon death row inmate Clarence Little, young lawyer Brad Miller becomes the keeper of information that he never asked for. Little, who glibly takes responsibility for all his convictions but one, which involves a nanny working for then-governor Christopher Farrington, insists that Brad try to clear his name on that count. Farrington went on to become president of the United States, leaving behind any hint of scandal. Along with haunted freelance investigator Dana Cutler, Miller follows Little's lead—straight into a web of lies and deceit. Cutler believes that a serial killer known as the D.C. Ripper—not Little—is to blame. They could both die in the process of finding out the truth and bringing down a president.

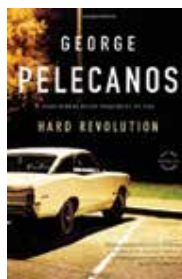
"This is one of those novels that we know is going to end well, but Margolin keeps the suspense taut by moving back and forth between stories and characters. ... Add a sharp team of FBI agents to the hunt for evidence, and the chase is on."

MARGARET CANNON, *GLOBE AND MAIL* (CANADA), 8/9/08

Hard Revolution

A Derek Strange Novel

By George Pelecanos (2004)



George Pelecanos has long examined Washington, D.C.'s underbelly with characters who brush up against the city's power structure but remain out of the headlines, rarely seen and often forgotten. Pelecanos first introduced the 50-something Derek Strange in *Right as Rain* (2001), *Hell to Pay* (2002), and *Soul Circus* (2003). In *Hard Revolution*, the author takes readers back in time and juxtaposes Derek's childhood with his early years as a cop. Pelecanos describes the city and its workings in detailed, urgent, edgy prose, always advancing his one clear message: even if you seek redemption, you won't always find it. (★★★★ May/June 2004)

THE STORY: In 1968, two African-American men living in Washington, D.C., navigate their way through the months before and after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Derek Strange is a rookie policeman on a straight path; his older brother, Dennis, is a Vietnam vet who, despite

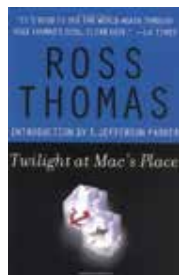
vows to start a new life, takes to the streets. When Dennis enters Alvin Jones's world of drugs, shady deals, and crime, Derek intervenes. But the race riots following King's death destroy the glittering promise of the 1960s and magnify the personal tragedy that befalls the Strange family.

"It is through Strange's impressions of the city in which he has spent his entire life that the full dimensions of Pelecanos's talents are revealed. ... As he ever more closely scrutinizes his characters and their environs, it may emerge that his true subject is not Washington or crime or race but rather family, in all its manifestations, nuclear and national." ANTHONY WALTON, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 3/21/04

See also *D.C. Noir* (2006) and *D.C. Noir 2* (2008), edited compilations of crime fiction set in and around Washington, D.C.; *The Big Blowdown* (1996), *King Suckerman* (1997), *The Sweet Forever* (1998), and *Shame the Devil* (2000) (collectively known as the D.C. Quartet).

Twilight at Mac's Place

By Ross Thomas (1990)



Any reader who hasn't had the joy of digging into Ross Thomas's prose should plan on excavating the Mac's Place Quartet: *The Cold War Swap* (1966, F Edgar Award for Best First Novel), *Cast a Yellow Shadow* (1967), *The Backup Men* (1971), and *Twilight at Mac's Place* (1990). "His books ought to come with a health warning: Prolonged exposure to this page-turning prose can lead to nervousness, loss of sleep and antisocial behavior," *Los Angeles Times* critic David Ansen wrote. Hardboiled, streetwise, and still top-notch entertainment decades after publication, Thomas's novels meld the international intrigue of John le Carré and Ian Fleming with the grit of George Pelecanos and the wise, melancholic soul of a veteran bartender. Thomas wrote more than two dozen novels (a handful under a pseudonym, Oliver Bleck) before his death in 1995. At the time, most of his work was out of print. Thanks to crime fiction's resurgence, that body of work is now available both in print and electronic versions.

THE STORY: Aging spooks Fred "Mac" McCorkle and Mike Padillo bought a bar in Washington, D.C.—"The sort of place you go when you have to meet someone and explain why you won't be getting the divorce after all"—to escape life in the fast lane. Fat chance. This time, the two become embroiled in Cold War intrigue when the death of CIA operative Steady Haynes, who has willed his memoirs to his son, Granville, a Los Angeles homicide investigator turned actor, prompts unhealthy interest in the memoirs and threatens to expose classified information.

"*Twilight at Mac's Place* is right up there with Chinaman's *Chance* and *Out on the Rim*, the best of the Thomas I've read. Like those books it has a satisfying heft, a plot that is sufficiently protracted to allow Thomas' view of the world to accrue in a hundred small, jaded—but somehow fondly so—asides." ROBERT WILSON, *USA TODAY*, 11/9/90

Murder at the Library of Congress

By Margaret Truman (1999)



The theft from a Miami museum of a 19th-century painting of Christopher Columbus doesn't seem to have much to do with the research of gallery owner and attorney Annabel Reed-Smith as she prepares an article for *Civilization*, the publication of record at the Library of Congress. Then Annabel discovers the body of Michele Paul, a library employee steeped in the biography of Bartolomé de las Casas, a fellow traveler of Columbus who could shed new light on Europeans' discovery of the New World. The two threads begin to intertwine and draw unwanted attention to the library in the form of Miami journalist Lucianne Huston, who is intent on discovering the truth.

Margaret Truman wrote 24 books in the Capital Crimes series, love letters to the city that she could never quite get out of her blood, even after her father left the White House in 1953. Although each novel involves a murder, the books' real heroes are the settings, from the Pentagon to the Smithsonian to Georgetown—and just about everywhere between. Especially intriguing for anyone who has visited the city and enjoys its history, the series, which ran from 1980 to Truman's death in 2008, remains a must-read.

"[The] promise of Washington insider knowledge is, of course, the great attraction of this cozy series, which steadily jogs along at a slow speed—unlike the headlong dashes into darkness that Rendell and Hillerman unfailingly provide. *Murder at the Library of Congress* will entertain those readers who like their mysteries lite and their detectives untormented." MAUREEN CORRIGAN, *WASHINGTON POST*, 11/28/99

See also *Murder in the White House* (1980), *Murder at the National Gallery* (1991), and *Murder on K Street* (2007).

Further Reading

BOMBSHELL | CATHERINE COULTER (2013)

WATERGATE: A NOVEL | THOMAS MALLON (2012)

THE 500 | MATTHEW QUIRK (2012)

THE BUTTER DID IT: A GASTRONOMIC TALE OF LOVE AND MURDER | PHYLLIS RICHMAN (1997)

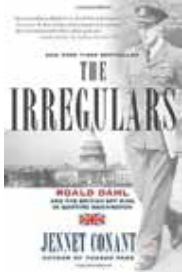
THE ZENITH ANGLE | BRUCE STERLING (2004) (★★★★ July/Aug 2004)

NONFICTION

The Irregulars

Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington

By Jennet Conant (2008)



A group of British spies and informants of middling importance eventually become some of Britain's best-known authors, including Roald Dahl, Ian Fleming, and playwright Noel Coward. While the importance of their work in Washington was debatable, Dahl and the other "Baker Street Irregulars" did live a life worthy of Fleming's creation, sipping martinis with the president and bedding influential women (all for Queen and country). In this group portrait, Conant also portrays a high-society Washington that is just as much a character as Dahl and his circle. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2008)

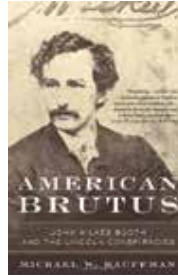
Filled with entertaining details and intriguing research, Conant's framing of the story points up the signature style honed in her best-selling *Tuxedo Park: A Wall Street Tycoon* (2002), *109 East Palace: Robert Oppenheimer and the Secret City of Los Alamos* (2005), an ability to illustrate how a seemingly obscure group of characters personifies the mood of a time and place and exercises more influence than one might expect.

"Wartime Washington ... was a place and time like no other, rich in atmosphere, dense in human drama. ... *The Irregulars* is a thoroughly enjoyable book, polished and inconsequential in the best ways." DAVID WALTON, MILWAUKEE JOURNAL-SENTINEL, 8/31/08

American Brutus

John Wilkes Booth and the Lincoln Conspiracies

By Michael W. Kauffman (2004)



On April 14, 1865, actor John Wilkes Booth burst into Abraham Lincoln's box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., and shot and fatally wounded the President. Since then, historians have reexamined the event—and the conspiracy surrounding it—in every detail. Kauffman, a political historian who has studied the assassination for more than 30 years, did plenty of hands-on research, reenacting Booth's leap, sleeping in Booth's home, and burning down a Civil War-era tobacco shed like the one where Booth met his fiery end. *American Brutus* sheds new light on a familiar story while dispelling myths that have lingered for 140 years.

Calling Kauffman's research "comprehensive" or "exhaustive" would be an understatement. The author appears to know more about the conspiracy surrounding Lincoln's assassination than anyone else alive today. But this is no dry, scholarly volume. Kauffman's storytelling skill engages readers, even though most already know the basics of the



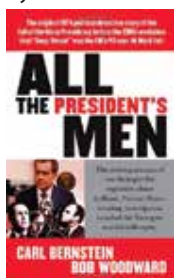
case, and his ability to build suspense and weave in surprising new revelations keeps them turning the pages. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2005)

“Kauffman tells his story with vigor and skill. ... [His] conclusions are controversial and likely to be the subjects of endless debates among Civil War historians, but there can be no doubt that he has done a superb work of research and analysis.” DAVID HERBERT DONALD, *BOSTON GLOBE*, 11/21/04

See also *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* by James L. Swanson (★★★★ May/June 2006).

All the President's Men

By Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (1974)



The most recognizable true-crime book set in Washington, D.C., found its way onto this list not because it's famous—which it most certainly is—but because, even (or maybe especially) in the Internet age, the story has seeped into the consciousness of anyone who spends time fulminating over the vagaries of the political process at the national level. (It didn't hurt that the book was adapted to the big screen in a 1976 film starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman.)

Both up-and-coming reporters at the *Washington Post*, Woodward and Bernstein blew the lid off the political crime of the century, a break-in at the Watergate Hotel meant to compromise the Democratic National Headquarters housed there. Conspiracy theorists felt exonerated to some extent by the investigation, which prominently features the mysterious Deep Throat and a cast of characters that—for once fulfilling that tired political-thriller cliché—“reached all the way to the top.” Advocates for investigative journalism laud the book for the intrepid reporting of two relative lightweights in a golden age of newspaper reporting (kids, ask your parents). In the end, of course, the country didn't have Nixon to kick around anymore—but it did have a new model for how journalists work a story.

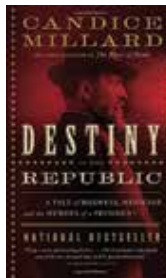
“The suspense in *All the President's Men* is more pervasive and finally more terrifying than a suspense story which holds its readers shivering in the darkness of graveyards and gothic castles because the setting is sunny Washington, D.C., a familiar place suddenly made unfamiliar by the presence of overwhelming fear. ... Reading the book, one relives the past 18 months in so compressed a form that feelings of outrage long since numbed suddenly surge anew.” DORIS KEARNS, *NEW YORK TIMES*, JUNE 9, 1974

See also *The Final Days* (1976); *The Secret Man: The Story of Watergate's Deep Throat* (2005).

Destiny of the Republic

A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President

By Candice Millard (2011)



James A. Garfield, the last American president born in a log cabin, rose from abject poverty in Ohio to become a scholar, a Civil War general, and a respected legislator. A somewhat reluctant—if honest and capable—leader of men off the battlefield, Garfield was wounded by would-be assassin Charles J. Guiteau on July 2, 1881, a mere 199 days into his term. It was

Garfield's treatment at the hands of his own doctors that finished the job Guiteau's bullets had started. The president lived for 11 weeks after the shooting. Even by the questionable standards of hygiene and medicine available at the time, Candice Millard argues, he should have survived his wounds. Ironically, the insane Guiteau, realizing the extent to which Garfield's doctors had botched the president's care, claimed in his own defense before going to the gallows for his crime that “General Garfield died from malpractice.” (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2012)

While the death—or the brief presidency—of James Garfield didn't shape American history as much as many historical events over the last two centuries, Candice Millard proves again, as she did in *River of Doubt* (★★★★ SELECTION Jan/Feb 2006), her earlier treatment of Theodore Roosevelt's adventures through the uncharted Amazon, that she is a capable and engaging guide. She makes a good case for renewed attention not only to the tragic circumstances surrounding Garfield's death but also to an extraordinary life that rarely garners more than a footnote in history books.

“Candice Millard's splendid tale of 'madness, medicine, and the murder of a president' recovers for us just what a remarkable—even noble—man Garfield was. ... This wonderful book reminds us that our 20th president was neither a minor nor merely a tragic figure, but rather an extraordinary one.” ALAN CATE, *CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER*, 9/17/11

Further Reading

THE PUZZLE PALACE | JAMES BAMFORD (1982)

CIRCLE OF TREASON: A CIA ACCOUNT OF TRAITOR ALDRICH AMES AND THE MEN HE BETRAYED | SANDRA GRIMES AND JEANNE VERTEFEUILLE (2012)

ARGO: HOW THE CIA AND HOLLYWOOD PULLED OFF THE MOST AUDACIOUS RESCUE IN HISTORY | ANTONIO MENDEZ AND MATT BAGLIO (2012)

RAWHIDE DOWN: THE NEAR ASSASSINATION OF RONALD REAGAN | DEL QUENTIN WILBER (2011) ■