

NOT SO INNOCENT

GREAT MYSTERY AND CRIME WRITING VOL 3

BY PATRICK SMITH

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON QUESTIONS *Bookmarks* readers ask us is, “When are you going to do the next volume of ‘Great Mysteries?’” So, for the third time, we oblige. In Volume II (July/Aug2007), we looked at international, contemporary hard-boiled and noir, and psychological mysteries and thrillers. In our Nov/Dec 2004 issue, we offered recommendations on historical mysteries and police procedurals. Now, we examine neo-noir crime novels, more recent historical crime novels, and offerings by young crime writers. Stay tuned for Volume IV.

NEO-NOIR

Noir crime fiction—James M. Cain (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Mildred Pierce*), Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*), Patricia Highsmith, and, later, Jim Thompson, David Goodis, and James Crumley, for a start—used to mean flawed heroes, seductive dames, and shocking glimpses into society’s violent underbelly.

Noir hasn’t gone away, but it’s had a makeover.

These days, mash-ups and genre jumping are all the rage. In the last decade or so, writers, inspired by the instant accessibility of information, have changed the way we think about noir. Throw in a thoroughgoing cynicism that even the old-schoolers couldn’t match, and you’ve got neo-noir crime fiction.

Neo-noir fiction is as varied as the genres and the styles that authors adapt to their stories, but the books still give

a nod to crime cinema and graphic novels. When well done, as in the books recommended below, those influences are woven seamlessly into the plot, evoking a strong sense of place and a keen attention to pop culture.

“I began as a lover of ’30s gangster movies and that eventually led me, via Bogart and Cagney, to noir,” Megan Abbott, the Edgar Award-winning author, says about her own immersion in the genre. “I think I fell first for *Sunset Boulevard* and *Double Indemnity*—the more glamorous noir. Then, the more I dug in, I came to love the sleazier, infinitely lush depth of B-noir. ... It’s primal and seductive, the big emotions of life laid bare.”

“Writing about regular working women (nurses, teachers, bookkeepers) in a world we’re used to seeing populated by detectives, cops, strippers and prostitutes makes it easier to seem ‘now’” (*3:AM Magazine*, 8/24/09).

Weirdos, outcasts, femme fatales, detectives, and random losers whose character flaws make some of the more traditional noir antiheroes look tame by comparison—they’re all here, and they’re all waiting.



CHARLIE HUSTON

After a failed attempt at acting and a career of sorts as a bartender, Charlie Huston crashed the noir party with his debut, *Caught Stealing* (2004), the first in the Hank Thompson trilogy. Since then, he's published nearly a dozen well-received novels (*Six Bad Things* [2005], also part of the trilogy, was nominated for an Edgar)—all of which resonate with the author's aberrant and entertaining take on society's dregs.



In *Caught Stealing*, washed-up baseball star Hank Thompson has become a cliché. An alcoholic bartender in a Manhattan dive, Hank has resigned himself to a life of unfulfilled dreams. Things change when a neighbor asks him to cat-sit. Beaten nearly to death by Russian gangsters, Hank assumes that his neighbor is hiding something important. He's right. Fortunate to have survived the

ordeal, Hank returns in *Six Bad Things* and *A Dangerous Man* (2006).

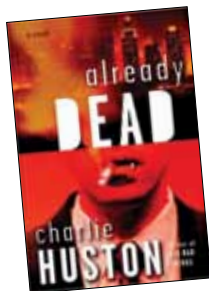
Even for readers who shy away from stories that have anything to do with the tragically hip undead, Huston's "supernatural noir" Vampyre novels—the Joe Pitt Case-books series—work. They're clever, darkly humorous, and thoroughly hard-boiled (and, the squeamish be warned, ultraviolent).

In *Already Dead* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006), the first of the five in the series to date, Huston lays the foundation for a New York inhabited by Vampyres who have split themselves into factions, each with its own aims and unique identity.

Since Joe Pitt first contracted the virus that transformed him into a Vampyre, he's gone Rogue and does odd jobs for the Coalition, including tracking a high-society runaway to the city's most unsavory haunts. Failure is not an option—the penalty for disappointing the Coalition's chief is most unpleasant—and when Pitt discovers the truth behind the girl's disappearance, it's every Undead for himself.

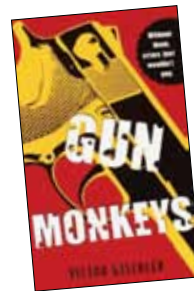
Two stand-alones, *The Shotgun Rule* (2007), a coming-of-age story involving a stolen bicycle and a meth lab, and *The Mystic Arts of Erasing All Signs of Death* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2009), a reference to the "Clean Team" that sanitizes death scenes, solidify Huston's reputation.

"Huston has developed a reputation for his own brand of noir fiction, by turns side-splittingly funny and gruesomely violent and repugnant," Peter Mergendahl writes about *The Shotgun Rule*. "[Readers] might just find a glimmer of hope by its end" (*Rocky Mountain News*, 8/24/07).



VICTOR GISCHLER

The settings for Victor Gischler's novels—a rural Oklahoma university and Florida, for instance—couldn't be more out of central casting from the noir handbook. Or maybe it's just that any bizarre situation rattling around long enough in Gischler's warped, capable mind is bound to come out fully formed as neo-noir-inspired mayhem.



In the author's debut, the Edgar-nominated *Gun Monkeys* (2001), Charlie "The Hook" Swift heads south while considering a unique problem: "I turned the Chrysler onto the Florida Turnpike with Rollo Kramer's headless body in the trunk, and all the time I'm thinking I should've put some plastic down." Later, Charlie unwittingly kills four police officers in a strip club; his boss goes

missing; he gets something some very bad men want; and all his friends start dying.

It's good for Charlie that he's got self-control issues: one of his least proud moments sees him pumping .38 slugs into a stuffed polar bear in his girlfriend's garage. He'll need to muster all that anger if he wants to survive.

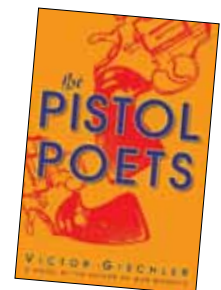
If *Gun Monkeys* sets the tone for Gischler's four crime novels, *The Pistol Poets* (2004), the follow-up, raises the bar for warped and darkly humorous violence. Visiting professorships are a dime a dozen, and poetry professor Jay Morgan suffers through his at Eastern Oklahoma University. In addition to wondering where he'll end up when the year's over, he's got a more immediate problem: there's a dead student in his bed.

Introduce an amorous and none-too-ethical student-newspaper reporter, a murderer and drug dealer who masquerades as a graduate student, and an amateur poet who happens to have just the skills that Morgan requires, and the explosive conclusion takes care of itself.

Where's Gischler coming from that his novels so defiantly and with such apparent glee run off the tracks?

"I hate heroes in crime who have flaws like 'They care too much' or they're alcoholics and 'struggle every day to keep sober.' That ABC After School Special stuff leaves me cold," Gischler says. "If my protagonists ever feel any sense of redemption, then it truly is a triumph because they start so far down in a moral/ethical hole" (*Spinetingler Magazine*, 3/24/10).

See also *Suicide Squeeze* (2005) and *Shotgun Opera* (2006).



JOE LANSDALE

Over more than 30 years, Joe Lansdale has become one of the most prolific—and eclectic—writers working today, and he has won a slew of awards in crime, horror, and fantasy. His influences range from Truman Capote to Jim Thompson to H. P. Lovecraft, and he has been associated with literary movements such as splatterpunk and cowpunk. Pinning down Lansdale's work isn't an easy task since he fuses genres so seamlessly and to such great effect.

Lansdale describes himself, maybe with a little irony, as “the equivalent of Aesop meets Flannery O'Connor on a date with William Faulkner, the events recorded by James M. Cain” in the anthology *Sanctified and Chicken-Fried* (2009). Funny thing—he's not far from the mark.

Especially engaging is the Hap Collins and Leonard Pine series, set in Laborde, Texas, which brings together two unlikely compadres—Hap is a white laborer, Leonard a gay black man—to solve crimes, sometimes against their will.

Savage Season (1990) introduces the two, but Lansdale hits his stride with the follow-up, *Mucho Mojo* (1994). When Leonard learns that his Uncle Chester has died, Leonard and Hap clean out Chester's house. A skeleton buried in the floorboards complicates matters, and the two set out to prove Chester's innocence in a series of child murders.

In the third installment, *The Two-Bear Mambo* (1995), the pair can avoid jail time for a crack house arson if they agree to find Florida Grange, a lawyer (and Hap's ex) who disappeared while investigating a suspicious jailhouse hanging in nearby Grovetown.

Lansdale's one-offs are equally entertaining, and *Leather Maiden* (2008) is one of his best. Once a Pulitzer Prize nominee for his journalism, Cason Statler returns home to Camp Rapture, Texas, with his tail between his legs, a broken relationship, and a laundry list of indiscretions on his résumé. When he gets a whiff of a sensational story involving a beautiful student at the local university, his brother, as well as a serial killer and well-preserved corpses, Cason can either go back to drinking or follow his journalistic instincts to their unsavory conclusion.

“Lansdale has been writing his brand of quirky country noir for several decades,” *Thomas Gaughan* writes in *Booklist*, “with frequent excursions into fantasy, SF, horror, and westerns; fans of each genre revere him.”

Or, as a friend and avid reader put it after finishing *Leather Maiden* in one night, “Nobody out-Lansdales Lansdale.”

Enough said.

See also, from the Hap and Leonard series, *Captains Outrageous* (2001) and *Vanilla Ride* (2009), and *The Bottoms* (2000), *Sunset and Sawdust* (2004), and *Lost Echoes* (2007).



JONATHAN LETHEM

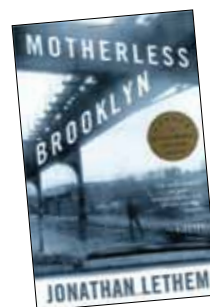
Jonathan Lethem has written eight novels and four collections, all of which contain elements of SF, detective fiction, and the “New Weird” in a highly literary package. Long recognized as one of the most daring writers working today (think Don DeLillo, Philip K. Dick, Steven Millhauser, and others walking the fine line between fringe and mainstream), Lethem, who began as an aspiring artist before finding his writing voice, has won a MacArthur “Genius” Grant and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999).

Lethem built his early reputation as an outlier on his debut novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music* (1994). Overshadowed by later—and more mainstream—novels, *Gun* inspired a cult following based on a through-the-looking-glass world (despite a near-future feel, Lethem suggests that the novel is set in a parallel 1958) that includes noir plotting (outcast PI Conrad Metcalf searches for a killer), a talking kangaroo, antimemory drugs, and a police force straight out of 1984.

Lethem's fifth novel, *Motherless Brooklyn*, cemented his reputation as an accomplished and adventurous writer. Lionel Essrog, an orphaned Tourette's sufferer who, along with three boyhood friends, is taken under the wing of small-time mobster Frank Minna, finds himself at loose ends when his mentor won't reveal his killer—even as he draws his last breath.

“Unlike the stock detective novel it shadows, the thriller in which clarity emerges on the final page,” Albert Mobilio comments in *McSweeney's*, “*Motherless Brooklyn* immerses us in the mind's dense thicket, a place where words split and twine in an ever-deepening tangle” (10/17/99).

See also *Amnesia Moon* (1995).



RECENTLY REVIEWED *Men and Cartoons: Stories* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2005); *The Disappointment Artist* (★★★★ **SELECTION** July/Aug 2005); *You Don't Love Me Yet* (★★★ May/June 2007); *Chronic City* (★★★ Jan/Feb 2010)



DENISE MINA

Atmospheric and character-driven, Denise Mina's novels (*Beneath the Bleeding* [2007], *The Grave Tattoo* [★★★★ May/June 2007], *Wire in the Blood* [1997]) recall those of fellow countrymen—and “Tartan Noir” writers (the term was coined by James Ellroy)—Ian Rankin (Inspector Rebus) and Val McDermid.

Mina uses as her backdrop the issues and social upheaval that characterized Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, and her novels introduce a new kind of noir character in investigative reporter in Maureen O'Donnell, a worker at Glasgow Women's Shelter (the *Garnethill* trilogy), and investigative reporter Patricia “Paddy” Meehan, a single mother and staunch Catholic in predominantly Protestant Glasgow.

In the award-winning *Garnethill* (1998), Mina's debut (written while the author was a graduate student in criminology in the late 1990s), former mental patient and sexual-abuse survivor Maureen wakes after a night of drinking to find Douglas, her therapist and lover, horribly murdered and mutilated. The prime suspect, Maureen must exonerate herself. In the process, she uncovers evidence of systemic systematic rapes at the Northern Hospital—and must come face-to-face with her own demons. Maureen returns in *Exile* (2000) and *Resolution* (2001).

Paddy Meehan makes her first appearance in *Field of Blood* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005), where, as a copygirl who toils at Glasgow's *Daily News* in hopes of one day becoming a reporter, she follows the trail of two young boys accused of murdering a toddler.

See also *The Dead Hour* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006).

Other Neo-Noir Authors to Consider

DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI *The Wheelman* (2005), *The Blonde* (2007), *Secret Dead Men* (2005), *Severance Package* (2008)

PAUL TREMBLAY *The Little Sleep* (2009)



CRIMES AGAINST HISTORY

RECENT HISTORICAL CRIME NOVELS/WRITERS OF NOTE

Defining the historical crime novel, as with so many distinctions one makes when categorizing genre fiction, is like squeezing a handful of sand. In a publishing market driven by high-dollar thrillers and adventure novels (Dan Brown, James Rollins, and Clive Cussler, to name a few), the “smaller” books often get pushed to the side. To be sure, there's plenty of great historical crime being published—and this list just scratches the surface.

But what is historical crime?

How close to the present can the historical crime novel come and still be historical? (Tom Cain has written a couple of rousing thrillers for which the ink was barely dry on their backstories.)

How important is attention to historical detail? (That, of course, depends upon how willing the reader is to suspend disbelief.)

“From the outset, the genre constructs a world whereby the ordinary routes of life are disrupted,” William Edwards writes of historical crime and its readers. “Something happens that forces us to ask questions about society and the actions of its members” (Bouchercon newsletter 36, 2005).

That vague definition works from an academic perspective, but actually, readers embrace historical crime novels because, above all, their stories engage them as they immerse themselves into different times and places.

Bottom line: You may not be able to define historical crime fiction, but you'll know it when you read it.

BORIS AKUNIN

Boris Akunin (the pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili) is the Umberto Eco of Russia. A philologist, critic, and translator, Akunin gained international acclaim after hitting best seller lists in his homeland. Now up to eleven installments, the Erast Petrovich Fandorin series evokes pre-Revolution Czarist Russia and Europe. Akunin has also penned a trilogy featuring the crime-solving Russian Orthodox nun and provincial school teacher Sister Pelagia. All are in English translation.

In *The Winter Queen* (1998), Fandorin's debut set in Moscow in 1876, the young detective follows the case of a gallant who—much to the horror of onlookers—casually commits suicide in the crowded Alexander Gardens. Police



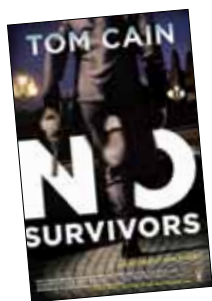
chalk the death up to whim and the general decadence of the time. But Fandorin believes otherwise.

Subsequent books in the series neatly develop Fandorin's character and revel in the profligacy and pomp of Russian court life and the class divide that drives so much of the action. Both Fandorin and Pelagia are quirky and engaging, and Akunin has an eye for the affected manners of 19th-century Russia. Particularly strong in the Fandorin series is the constant sense of the imminent collapse of the monarchy and a Russia hurtling toward revolution.

See also the Erast Fandorin series: *Turkish Gambit* (1998), *Murder on the Leviathan* (2004), *The Death of Achilles* (2005), and the Sister Pelagia series: *Sister Pelagia and the Black Monk* (2007), *Sister Pelagia and the White Bulldog* (2007), *Sister Pelagia and the Red Cockerel* (2007).

TOM CAIN

In *The Accident Man* (2008), a novel that writer Wilbur Smith calls "the best first thriller I have read since *Day of the Jackal*," British journalist-cum-novelist Tom Cain introduces Samuel Carver, a hit man with a heart of gold—when he's not taking out bad guys with extreme prejudice.



When Carver is assigned a target in a Paris tunnel, he complies. Things go as planned—the black Mercedes carrying the target is wrapped around an abutment, and the occupants are presumed dead—until Carver, who believes that he's just eliminated a terrorist, realizes that he's been set up. The real victim of the accident is none other than Princess

Diana. In the aftermath, Carver falls in love with a Russian spy and ends up on the wrong side of a feud with a sadistic Russian oligarch.

The follow-up, *No Survivors* (2009), reprises Carver's character, this time in a race to save the world from nuclear Armageddon via discarded Russian suitcase nukes. Carver, his memory and his strength destroyed, doesn't even recognize Alix Petrova, the spy who loves him. Slowly regaining his life, Carver tracks down a radical oilman and a rogue general intent on selling the world on the dangers of al Qaeda, a terrorist group previously thought too small to be of any concern.

See also *Assassin* (2009).

ANNE PERRY

Anne Perry has been prolific since *The Cater Street Hangman* (1979), the opening installment in the Thomas and Charlotte Pitt series. Since then, Perry has penned dozens of novels (at the breakneck pace of two books a year since

NEVER TRUST ANYONE OVER 40

YOUNG CRIME WRITERS

MEGAN ABBOTT

Whether she's writing novels based on true crimes (*Bury Me Deep* [2009], *The Song Is You* [2007]) or creating characters out of whole cloth, Megan Abbott knows how to set the hook. Abbott's novels are pitch-perfect noir case studies (she's garnered multiple Edgar nominations and won for *Queenpin* [2007]) that update the conventions, with strong heroines competing with men at their own game. Set against the Vegas of Sinatra and the Rat Pack (what time and place could be more hard-boiled and noir?), *Queenpin*, which features the hard-as-nails moll Gloria Denton and her protégé, established Abbott's bona fides. *Bury Me Deep* fictionalizes a notorious murder in Depression-era America.

CHELSEA CAIN

In *Heartsick* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2008), her debut novel, Chelsea Cain takes an old trope—the thrust-and-parry between cop and serial killer (think *Silence of the Lambs*)—and gives it a hard twist. In this case, Gretchen Lowell tortures police detective Archie Sheridan before giving herself up. Now, Sheridan needs help from his erstwhile nemesis. The follow-up, *Sweetheart* (2008), brings Sheridan and Lowell back for an encore and offers equally outré pleasures.



SOFI OKSANEN

Award-winning Finnish novelist Sofi Oksanen is another of the rising Scandinavian crime stars—and, in her early 30s with three books to her credit (*Stalin's Cows* [2003], *Baby Jane* [2005], and her latest effort, *Purge* [2007]), her reputation is about to go international. *Purge* covers half a century in war-torn Estonia and centers on sex trafficking, Soviet occupation, and a complex family history. "With a tone somewhere between Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and the best of the current crop of European crime novelists, this bitter gem promises great things from the talented Oksanen," *Kirkus Reviews* raves.

REBECCA PAWEL

Rebecca Pawel published the Edgar Award-winning *Death of a Nationalist* (2003) in her early twenties. Since then, she's reprised Lieutenant Carlos Tejada and a painstakingly detailed post-Civil War Spain in *Law of Return* (2004), *The Watcher in the Pine* (2005), and *The Summer Snow* (2006), of which Jana L. Perskie writes, "This rich historical novel is much more than a mystery, although the sleuth-work and suspense are riveting" (*MostlyFiction Book Reviews*, 7/15/05).

1990), introduced a new detective in William Monk, and brought Victorian England to life for two generations of readers.

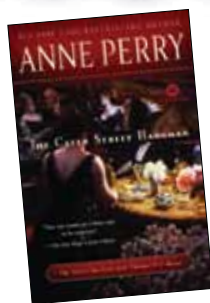
In the first of the Pitt novels, Pitt investigates the strangling of a maid from a well-to-do household. As the case unravels, Pitt finds himself attracted to young Charlotte Ellison, a society girl who would make an unlikely match.

In *The Face of a Stranger* (1990), the first in the Monk series, the eponymous detective wakes up after a horrific carriage accident with no memory of his previous life. Slowly rebuilding his identity, he comes to know himself as William Monk, his home as the London of 1856, and his primary case the murder of Major Gray, a minor British noble. Hester Latterly, who nurses Monk through his amnesia, is a recurring character.

Both series focus on Victorian manners and immerse readers in the period.

Perry's own life—at least her distant past—reads like a crime novel. In 1954, at the age of 15, Perry (then Juliet Hulme) was convicted, along with her friend Pauline Parker, of the murder of Parker's mother in New Zealand. She was released five years later.

See also the Charlotte and Thomas Pitt series: *Half Moon Street* (2000) and *The Whitechapel Conspiracy* (2001), and the William Monk series: *Death of a Stranger* (2002) and *Funeral in Blue* (2002).



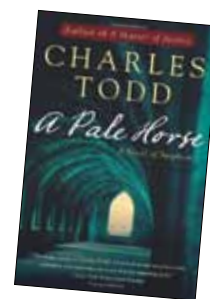
his daughter at risk from Fraera, the wife of a priest whom Demidov imprisoned years before. Bent on vengeance, the woman will stop at nothing to destroy Demidov and his family.

No writer treats Stalin and Cold War Soviet politics more compellingly than Tom Rob Smith. The third book in the Demidov trilogy, *A New World*, is scheduled for a 2011 release.

CHARLES TODD

Mother/son writing team Charles Todd is known for the popular detective Ian Rutledge, a veteran of the Great War who returns to England with some heavy psychological baggage.

A Pale Horse (2007), the series' tenth installment, takes Rutledge dangerously close to the edge of sanity when he follows the trail of a man who harbors secrets from the Great War, investigates the death of a man wearing a monk's robe and a gas mask, and comes face-to-face with others scarred by the violence of their pasts.



In the more recent *A Matter of Justice* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2009), Rutledge investigates the shocking death of Harold Quarles, a financial advisor with many enemies. The crime, Rutledge discovers, was decades in the making and involved Quarles's time as a soldier in the Boer War. Using the same skills that allow him to chase killers so ruthlessly, Rutledge must battle his own demons.

"There's no end to war in Charles Todd's unnervingly beautiful historical novels, only the enduring legacy of suffering inherited by those who survive and remember," Marilyn Stasio writes (*New York Times*, 12/26/08).

See also *A Test of Wills* (first in the series, 1996), *A Long Shadow* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006), *A False Mirror* (2007), *The Red Door* (2010).

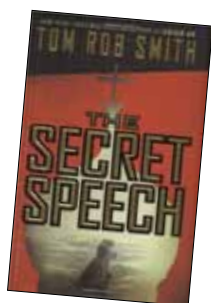
TOM ROB SMITH

Leo Demidov, once a rising star in Stalin's Russia, tracks a brutal serial killer and runs afoul of the powers that be, who insist that such gruesome crimes would never occur in the utopian Soviet state. As evidence mounts—and as Demidov is threatened with the loss of his family and the privilege that he has worked so hard to attain—only his sense of justice keeps him going.

But can one man fight such vast corruption?

That's the haunting question that Tom Rob Smith explores in his debut novel, *Child 44* (★★★★ July/Aug 2008), which won critical acclaim and established the young author (see "Never Trust Anyone Over 40," below) as a force in historical crime fiction.

In *The Secret Speech* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2009), the aftermath of Stalin's death sees the newly installed Khrushchev regime seeking to distance itself from Stalin's atrocities by leaking sordid details of the purges. Despite Demidov's disavowal of Stalin years earlier, his previous life as an insider haunts him, placing



Other Historical Mystery Authors to Consider

ARIANA FRANKLIN *Mistress of the Art of Death* (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2007)

WALTER MOSLEY (Easy Rawlins series): *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996), *Cinnamon Kiss* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2005), *Blonde Faith* (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2008)



MATTHEW PEARL *The Dante Club* (★★★★ May/June 2003), *The Poe Shadow* (★★ Sept/Oct 2006), *The Last Dickens* (★★★ July/Aug 2009) ■