



## CRIMINAL MIND ZAC O'YEAH

# Two, or more, to tango

**When it comes to crime writing, collaboration is common but tricky business**

Crime writing as teamwork is not unusual—because it's handy to have somebody to plan your crimes with, even if they are only crimes in the mind.

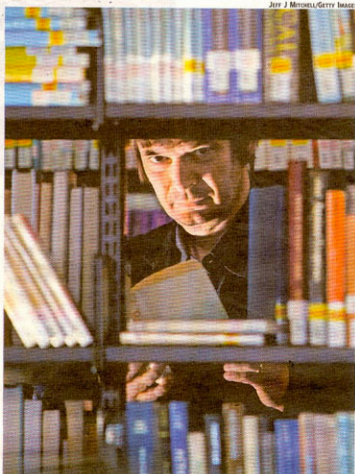
One successful early writer duo were the Swedish couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, who wrote 10 best-selling and still-popular police procedurals back in the 1960s, such as *The Laughing Policeman* (the movie starred Walter Matthau, if you recall). It was a series which, in a realist manner, investigated the perceived rot in the modern welfare state. The writers formed an organic partnership: husband and wife living and writing together, so their prose sensibilities were closely attuned, if at times bordering on the journalistic.

Another way to go about things is to do what James Patterson, who is too prolific to write everything himself, does. His modus is to come up with terrific ideas and then contract collaborators, either as co-writers (named on the book cover) or ghost writers (unnamed). This industrial method of writing is similar to that used often by painters and sculptors who get disciples and studio assistants to do the tedious parts of their work.

Patterson recently co-wrote, with Swedish crime writer Liza Marklund, *The New York Times* No.1 best-seller *The Postcard Killers*, a holiday thriller where the premise is that a single serial killer haunts every popular European tourist attraction.

Even more interestingly, Patterson's latest book, *Private India*, is co-written with Ashwin Sanghi, who has under his belt three Dan Brown-style thrillers that combine Indian mythology with racy plots. The *Private* series, about a global detective agency, is now eight books old and set in countries ranging from Australia to Germany. To write its India segment Sanghi was roped in for authentic local Mumbai flavour and judging from the result, there is a good chance that this will develop into another global hit.

But it is trickier for multiple writers to team up to write. I recall one pioneering example, *The Floating Admiral* (1931), a collaborative effort by a bunch of top British crime writers



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**Joint effort:** Ian Rankin (left) and Agatha Christie, legends in the world of crime fiction, have participated in separate collaborative projects.

Inspector Rebus (by Ian Rankin) has to work together with Roy Grace (by Peter James, whom you might recall I interviewed in this column in 2011).

The stories range from police procedurals to courtroom dramas, and there are even a couple of thrillers with supernatural components (transmigration, brain tweaking, magical bracelets). In one of the most action-packed stories, T. Jefferson Parker's character Joe Trona, who has a hideously disfigured face, goes fishing in Mexico with Wyatt Hunt, the protagonist of novels by John Lescroart. While on holiday, these two heroes who have left their '45s, '44s and '40s at home, have a run-in with a drug cartel which upsets their plans for relaxation.

It all makes for fascinating reading if you're a genre fan—or a fan of any of the writers—because in the process of putting the fictional characters through the mixer-grinder that a collaborative effort invariably is, they sometimes emerge stronger from the challenge. I was never a big fan of Harry Bosch, but here Michael Connelly's detective is pretty inspiring. Perhaps it is through Dennis Lehane's efforts that the wooden Bosch is brought alive through a process which involved Connelly doing the first six pages, with an outline of the crime and premise, before handing over to Lehane, who added another 20 pages of thrills.

Does this kind of collaboration make for good reading if you aren't a fan? Hit and miss. Many stories flow fairly seamlessly because contemporary pulp writing conforms to a universal style in accordance with which all writers sound more or less the same. Other stories are jumpy and jagged—like writing exercises for best-selling authors on a day off. But hey, considering the galaxy of literary stars contributing, and the titbits about writing approaches revealed in the introduction to each story, this is one book that you're going to have fun with.

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including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and G.K. Chesterton, who chipped in with one chapter each in what was essentially a literary relay race. Following a complex set of game rules (explained in the book) they created one of those typical puzzle mysteries with all the mandatory red herrings and suspect side characters.

While reading it I pitied the writer (Anthony Berkeley) saddled with the final task of wrapping up the plot in a chapter aptly titled *Clearing Up The Mess*.

Which brings me to the book I've been reading this month—perhaps the most spectacular example of multi-author collaborations in recent years, namely, *FaceOff* (Sphere, ₹499, edited by David Baldacci), involving 23 of the biggest-selling thriller writers of today.

*FaceOff* is a product of a guild of authors called International Thriller Writers (ITW), co-founded in 2004 by David Morrell (an early novel of whose spawned the *Rambo* franchise starring Sylvester Stallone). The ITW is a thriving organization of over 2,500 gents and ladies in 49 different countries, and rather than charging membership fees they get their most famous members to gift stories for anthologies. The latest of which is *FaceOff*.

Here the grand concept is that the writers are paired together to write short stories where their most famous characters encounter each other—for example in *In The Nick Of Time* a man confesses on his deathbed in Edinburgh that in 1964 he might have knifed a man in Brighton, which means that to close the 50-year-old case