

crime

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New Swede on the block

The Dead of Summer
by Mari Jungstedt,
translated by Tiina Nunnally

Doubleday, £12.99 * £11.69; 274pp

The Redeemed
by M.R. Hall

Mantle, £12.99 * £11.69; 402pp

Death on a Galician Shore
by Domingo Villar,
translated by Sonia Soto

Abacus, £11.99 * £10.79; 371pp

Marcel Berlins

Now that, for different reasons, Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell are no longer engaged in crime fiction, the entertaining battle for the spurious title of top Swede of Crime is well on the way. For some time reviewers have been besieged by novels written by “the next Larsson” or “the heir to Mankell”.

In reality, surprising though it may seem, being Swedish does not automatically confer the ability to write good crime. But Mari Jungstedt is the real deal, certainly on my Best Swede shortlist. *The Dead of Summer* is her fifth book set on the holiday island of Gotland. A jogger on the beach of a tiny neighbouring island is shot with an ancient gun, the bullets entering his body in a particular pattern. With Inspector Anders Knutas on a marriage-reviving holiday, his newly appointed, attractive but enigmatic deputy, Karin Jacobsson, inquires, but there's a dearth of suspects. Knutas returns. A worker in a limestone quarry is killed in identical fashion. The plot is clever, the characters believable and the solution shocking. Jungstedt gets better and better.

In real life there would have been no way that Jenny Cooper, the coroner of Severn Vale, could have kept her job. As M.R. Hall's fictional heroine, though, she has made it into her third breathlessly enjoyable novel. She's stubborn, insubordi-



BRUNO EHRH / GETTY

nate, leads a chaotic life and is prone to exceed her legal powers. She's mentally and emotionally unstable, under psychiatric care, and consumes many pills. Fortunately she is also obsessed with seeing that, as coroner, she does justice to the dead—in effect the clients of her job—and their loved ones left behind. In *The Redeemed* she is not satisfied that a man whose body is found with a sign of the cross slashed on his torso had committed suicide. A priest attempts to persuade her that a man convicted of killing a porn star-turned-campaigner for decency is innocent. The two deaths, and others that follow, are linked to a local church. Cooper does her utmost to discover the truth, against the wishes of the Establishment.

A Spanish writer who does not set his novels in Madrid or Barcelona is to be welcomed, and the rugged coastline of

Galicia makes a suitably unsettling setting. Detective Inspector Leo Caldas of the Vigo police — a laconic type, food-loving, moodily estranged from his partner, in an uneasy relationship with his viniculturalist father — investigates the drowning of a local fisherman, Castelo, the suspicion of suicide giving way to murder. At the heart of the mystery is the sinking of a boat in a storm in 1996, with the loss of its captain. Castelo was one of the three survivors. The villagers know something but remain obdurately silent. There's talk within the superstitious community that the boat has been seen again. A song by Grieg plays an important role. Caldas is an engaging copper and his loud, unsophisticated sidekick, Estevez, an amusing one.

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bestsellers

	Last week		Author	Publisher rpp	Sales this week
1	1	9th Judgement	James Patterson	Arrow, £7.99	23,755
2	–	The Red Queen	Philippa Gregory	Simon & Schuster, £7.99	19,961
3	4	Scorpia Rising	Anthony Horowitz	Walker, £6.99	12,075
4	2	Those in Peril	Wilbur Smith	Macmillan, £18.99	11,588
5	15	The Slap	Christos Tsiolkas	Atlantic, £7.99	11,384
6	5	From the Dead	Mark Billingham	Sphere, £7.99	11,135
7	–	Stand by Me	Sheila O'Flanagan	Headline Review, £7.99	11,031
8	–	The Cobra	Frederick Forsyth	Corgi, £7.99	10,884
9	6	Chances	Freya North	Harper, £7.99	10,582
10	17	Room	Emma Donoghue	Picador, £7.99	10,381
11	16	One Day	David Nicholls	Hodder, £7.99	9,333
12	–	Goddess of Vengeance	Jackie Collins	Simon & Schuster, £14.99	9,290
13	14	Solar	Ian McEwan	Vintage, £7.99	9,245
14	11	Theodore Boone	John Grisham	Hodder, £6.99	9,108
15	3	Blue-eyed boy	Joanne Harris	Black Swan, £7.99	9,041
16	–	One Day in May	Catherine Allott	Penguin, £7.99	9,036
17	–	Twilight Saga: The Official Illustrated Guide	Stephenie Meyer	Atom, £17.99	8,994
18	–	The Burning Wire	Jeffery Deaver	Harper, £7.99	8,653
19	–	Killing Hour	Andrew Gross	Harper, £7.99	8,543
20	18	Started Early, Took My Dog	Kate Atkinson	Black Swan, £7.99	8,210
21	–	Sing You Home	Jodi Picoult	Hodder, £18.99	8,190
22	7	Men I've Loved Before	Adele Parks	Headline Review, £7.99	7,768
23	9	Homecoming	Cathy Kelly	Harper, £7.99	7,759
24	12	Play to Kill	P.J. Tracy	Penguin, £6.99	7,586
25	10	Big Girl	Danielle Steel	Corgi, £7.99	7,408

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Nicholas Clee reads between the lines

The news that World Book Night will return next year (April 23) and clearly aims to be an annual event will displease those book industry figures who argue that giving away a million books at a time of economic hardship is counterproductive. But the promotion seems not to have undermined the market values of the 20 selected titles. David Nicholls's *One Day* (No 11 this week, up from 16), for example, has as strong a grip on the chart as ever. It is hard to believe that it would be selling better had it not been part of the giveaway.

The success of Christos Tsiolkas's novel *The Slap*, at No 5 this week and ahead of some of the biggest names in commercial fiction, belies one truism about successful novels: that they have to feature likeable characters. Numerous Amazon reviewers of *The Slap* say that they could not relate to any of the people in the novel and that they dislike Tsiolkas's misanthropic tone. But such considerations are clearly not deterring buyers.

A drawback of e-books is that authors cannot sign them. But the creators of a gimmick called Autographry, which will be on display next month at BookExpo America, claim to be able to offer this service. How Autographry works is that a reader poses with the author for a photograph, which transfers to the

author's iPad. Using a stylus, the author scrolls a message beneath the photo, and clicks a button to send the reader an e-mail with a link to the signature and photo, which can be downloaded to the reader's e-book. If this catches on, signing sessions will become lengthy affairs.

One would love to promote the value of reading on the back of evidence from US researchers that reading improves the mood of adolescents. The researchers found that teenage readers were less likely to be depressed than were their counterparts who listened to pop music. But doubts about cause and effect induce scepticism. For example, if teenagers are depressed in the first place, are they not less likely to read than to engage in more passive activities?

children's

Charming helping of loss and love



Moon Pie
by Simon Mason

David Fickling, £10.99 * £9.89; 336pp

Amanda Craig

Stressed or dysfunctional families used to be a staple of childhood reading — think of Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes*, E. Nesbit's Five Children trilogy and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Yet as real families have become more riven by divorce, debt and other contemporary disasters, so authors have tended to turn away from these subjects. The big exception is Jacqueline Wilson, and the appetite of children for her novels proves that, as with newspapers, our appetite for dismay is consistent.

Simon Mason, better known as an adult novelist, has written an outstanding novel about the effects of bereavement on two

children. Martha, 11, is used to looking after her little brother, Tug. She cooks her brother his favourite pie, cleans the house and even tries to set him up with a new girlfriend.

Like Sophia Bennett's *Threads*, which won the second *Times/Chicken House* prize, this is a book that addresses painful events with a wonderfully ebullient comic touch. Much of this is thanks to Marcus, Martha's only friend and the most gloriously camp boy to have appeared in print since Nancy Mitford's Cedric. Obsessed with theatrical costume (“I wonder whether we could make it a teensy bit livelier... You can get some good artificial fur in electric blue,” is a typical line), he tries to help Martha to help her father.

But when, at the start of the novel Dad climbs up on to the roof and has to go to the doctor, it is clear that adults from social services to the children's grandparents are going to get involved. For Dad's strange behaviour is not only caused by the death of his beloved wife but also by his alcoholism.

Everything about *Moon Pie* is topical, from the desperation of the censorious grandparents to rescue Martha and Tug to the well-meaning intervention by the social services. Yet it's Mason's gift for the way that people, especially children, speak and think that makes the book gripping and absorbing.

Unlike Jacqueline Wilson's heroines, Martha doesn't have a trace of self-pity. Where adorable three-year-old Tug is

solidly sustained by food, Martha has brains and a kind of steely determination that makes her a true heroine. It gradually emerges that her mother was a successful actress and that what draws her to Marcus and his home film-making is not only her friend's delicious oddity but her own latent acting talent.

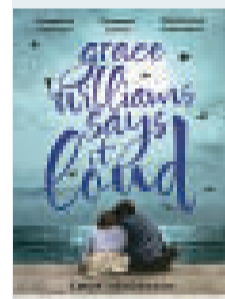
As in *Ballet Shoes*, this is what is going to save her and her family — though in the age of *Britain's Got Talent*, this will come about by a different route to acting school.

Of course, sooner or later, Dad has to pull himself together as well. Formerly a TV cameraman, he has been out of work for two years, picks fights and does strange things, such as taking his children for a picnic in the park in the middle of the night.

Reading between the lines, an adult will find this alarming and unbearably poignant, but shown through Martha's wise, innocent eyes it is not only bearable but wonderful. “When I'm older, she thought, I'll remember this midnight picnic as a good thing. I'll forget that I was scared of the dark and that Dad was strange. I'll remember the candles in the grass, like flowers made out of flame, and Tug dreaming of pie, and Dad telling me he loves me.”

Moon Pie addresses a difficult subject with a vigour and charm that will beguile any child interested in real life. The opposite of grim, its originality, tone and ebullience deserve prizes as well as praise.

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I read *Grace Williams Says It Loud* on my Kindle, so please excuse the Kindle-talk when I say that for me the first 10 per cent affected me more than the next 90. I was initially overwhelmed by compassion for the very young Grace, who, physically disabled and barely able to speak, misses out on the love, playfulness and burgeoning communication skills that are the infant's birthright. To be locked, as a baby, in a body that repels rather than attracts affection must be torture enough. To be unable to speak your way out of it must become Hell itself. Where Emma Henderson is astute in sensing how expectations quickly adapt to circumstance, Grace is soon willing to accept far too little from other people. There is neither rage nor self-pity in her account but something nearer stoicism.

For me, however, this is where the problems start, for the novel requires hard work from the reader to infer from the first-person narrative the pain cauterised within. Like Deirdre Hipwell last week, I was struck by the passage in which Grace is ordered to lick the excrement from the sides of the nurses' toilet: “I deserved it, they all agreed.” Deirdre was obviously upset by that and I wondered why I had not

been. Equally, her annual sessions with the pery dentist who inflicts oral sex on her pass with virtually no comment. The sudden desertion of her boyfriend, the armless raconteur Daniel, produces, we read, an outbreak of regressive behaviour, but her internal monologue does not reflect it.

We observe her life, then, through frosted glass, and it is hard to engage with. As Alyson Rudd wrote previously, when the outside world intrudes on the nursing home the narrative comes alive. But generally, I could not agree less with Deirdre's claim that the storytelling is beautifully stark. Instead of direct, declarative prose, which might suggest Grace's brutalisation, we get dreamy poetry. At times the metaphors work, such as

the dentist's tree-like machine “attached to the floor with bolts as big as roots” and the “Lucozade glow of London on the horizon”. But the onomatopoeias are mere doggerel: “ticky boo went the tap dancers' shoes”; or “slowly slippy-skipped down”.

Henderson, who was inspired to write the book by her own institutionalised sister (she was brave to put herself in as, I presume, the cruel sister Sarah), is determined to convince us that within so much ugliness, Grace has a beautiful mind and that it grants her privacy and mental liberation. Yet for me, after a while, the attempt looked not only patronising, but impertinent.

Each week a *Times* writer discusses the book of the month. Next week Alyson Rudd introduces Lionel Shriver's *So Much for That*. Buy *Grace Williams Says It Loud* for £6.79 (rrp £7.99) with free p&p by calling 0845 2712134 or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop and receive an exclusive essay by the author about Grace's voice

Plan your book group with The Times

May: *So Much for That* by Lionel Shriver. Buy a set of six for £35.95 with free p&p (rrp £47.94) by calling 0845 2712134

June: *This is Where I Leave You* by Jonathan Tropper. Buy a set of six for £33 with free p&p (rrp £47.94) by calling 0845 2712134

TIMESBOOKS
THE TIMES BOOK CLUB

Philip Howard's Lost words vocabularian

Somebody who gives much or undue attention to words. From the Latin *vox*, a voice, *vocabulum*, a word. Rhyme, roughly, with “No cab, you hairy one”. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 1899: “He is not a vocabularian; he uses, as none but a poet can, the old poetic materials.” The great vocabularian and lexicographer Samuel

Johnson wrote: “I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: [yet] I wish... that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like

the things which they denote.” Dream on Sam. Nevertheless, language is a defining characteristic of us humans. We should aim to be vocabularians without becoming spidered in the web of words. As in: Come on, Molly, let's do your “spellings”. We shall make a vocabularian of you.

The Times Bookshop bestsellers



1. **Wisden Cricketers' Almanac 2011**

Edited by Scyld Berry (rrp £45 * £29)

2. **Manifold Greatness**

Edited by Helen Moore and Julian Reid (rrp £19.99 * £17.99)

3. **We Are A Muslim, Please**

by Zaiba Malik (rrp £8.99 * £8.54)

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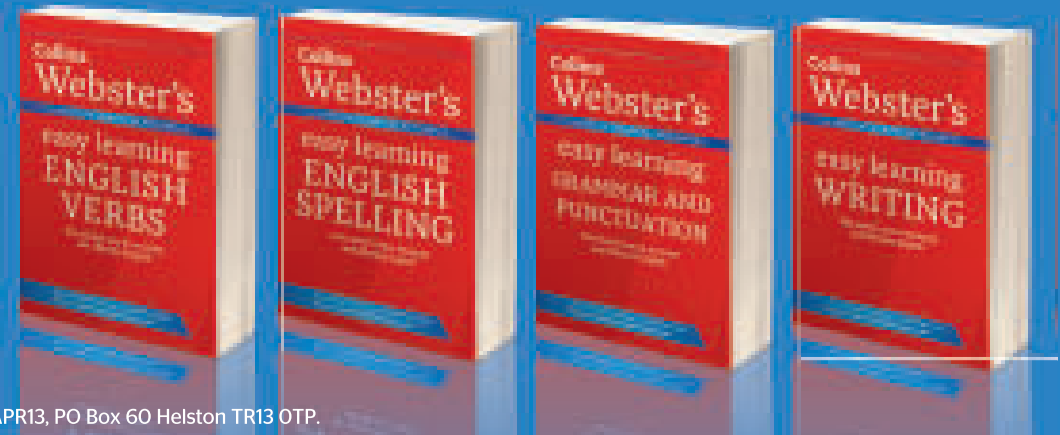
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