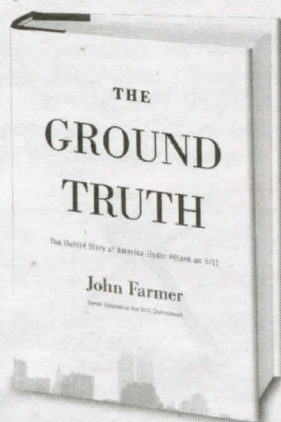


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The Year in Mayhem

Like the inhabitants of Lake Wobegon, every single one of my friends is exceptional, and I assume the same applies to your crowd. Which means that all our exceptional friends are expecting exceptional books for Christmas.

Lucky for us, some favorite authors came through with genre-stretchers this year. Tops on my list: **THE SCARECROW** (Little, Brown, \$27.99), Michael Connelly's *cri de coeur* for the journalism profession he once practiced as a crime reporter for The Los Angeles Times. The techno-savvy serial killer who stalks through this thriller serves as a grim metaphor for the implacable forces Connelly sees as draining the life from the nation's newspapers.

Walter Mosley also went off the grid this year with **THE LONG FALL** (Riverhead, \$25.95), a big-bad-city crime novel, set in New York, that introduces a new hero in Leonid McGill, an ex-boxer who sets himself up as a private eye in an attempt to make amends for his past sins as a mob fixer.

You never know what's in store when Ruth Rendell is writing as Barbara Vine, but her savage humor is on fine display in **THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT** (Shaye Areheart, \$25). In this lethal political novel, a Conservative member of Parliament's attempt to cover up a sexual misadventure goes awry when his mistress is killed during a bogus kidnapping. Keep in mind that the author is herself a member of Parliament — and be prepared for plenty of political animus.

It's always wise to expect the unexpected from Jeffery Deaver, whose technology-driven mysteries are the most fiendishly plotted in the genre. Alternative-reality games are the devil in the machine in **ROADSIDE CROSSES** (Simon & Schuster, \$26.95), a morbid thriller about California teenagers who turn into cyberbullies when they become addicted to violent role-playing on arcane Web sites.

Although it's much harder to pull off something astonishing in a longstanding private-eye series, Sara Paretsky manages to do just that in her new V.I. Warshawski novel. **HARDBALL** (Putnam, \$26.95) reaches back to the incendiary summer of 1966, when civil rights marches set off race riots in Chicago, to solve a case

involving a youth who served as a bodyguard to Martin Luther King. The way Paretsky tells it — with fist raised in moral outrage — the anger is still fresh because the pain never goes away.

Crimes of social injustice commonly fuel the action in mysteries by international authors. In **A DARKER DOMAIN** (Harper/HarperCollins, \$24.99), Val McDermid returns to 1984 for a damning look at the coal miners' strike that tore the heart out of a working-class Scottish community. The crimi-



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nal motivation in Arnaldur Indridason's **ARCTIC CHILL** (Minotaur, \$24.99) can be traced to murderous racial prejudice against Asian immigrants in Iceland. Sex trafficking is the common theme of two high-impact Swedish thrillers: **BOX 21** (Sarah Crichton/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$26), by Anders Roslund and Borge Hellstrom, and **THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE** (Knopf, \$25.95), by Stieg Larsson.

Looking beyond the best sellers, there were several surprise hits this year. **THE GHOSTS OF BELFAST** (Soho, \$25), a bleak, despairing first novel by Stuart Neville, is the most authentic piece of Irish noir fiction since Ken Bruen's thriller "The Guards." The brooding antihero, an I.R.A. enforcer during "the Troubles," sees the ghosts of the people he killed, and if he doesn't execute the men who ordered their deaths, these wrath-

ful spirits will never let him rest.

Strange as it sounds, Hannah Berry also catches the essence of noir in her first graphic novel, **BRITTEN AND BRÜLIGTLY** (Metropolitan/Holt, paper, \$20). The eerie narrative, elegantly drawn in sharp lines and monochromatic hues, conveys the metaphysical collapse of a melancholy private eye who specializes in confirming his clients' worst fears about their cheating lovers.

The characters who wander into the Tick Tock restaurant in **THIS WICKED WORLD** (Little, Brown, \$23.99), a first novel by Richard Lange, are the kind of drifters and grifters who give Hollywood Boulevard its local color. Jimmy Boone, the ex-con who tends bar at the Tick Tock, is an anomaly in this crowd — a guy who lives to help people.

Charlie Huston lives to shock. But not even his novels about a vampire private eye have the kick of **THE MYSTIC ARTS OF ERASING ALL SIGNS OF DEATH** (Ballantine, \$25). In this outlandish but rather sweet crime caper, a young slacker who works as a "trauma cleaner" (the guy who scrapes up the blood and gore after someone commits suicide) gets caught in a range war between rival cleaning companies. The oddball characters are originals; the dialogue is sublime.

Speaking of sweet stuff, consider **THE CASE OF THE MISSING SERVANT** (Simon & Schuster, \$24), by Tarquin Hall. This first novel is set in Delhi, where Vish Puri, founder and director of Most Private Investigators Ltd., performs discreet investigations into the backgrounds of prospective groomsmen, with surprising and often comic results.

Other appealing oddities: **THE BROKEN TEAGLASS** (Delacorte, \$25), a literary gem by Emily Arsenault, set in the fusty offices of a venerable publishing house and showcasing the research skills of two young lexicographers who discover clues to an unsolved murder in the citation files, and **THE SWEETNESS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PIE** (Delacorte, \$23), Alan Bradley's English country-house mystery about a precocious child who is training herself to be a scientific sleuth by working her way through "An Elementary Study of Chemistry."