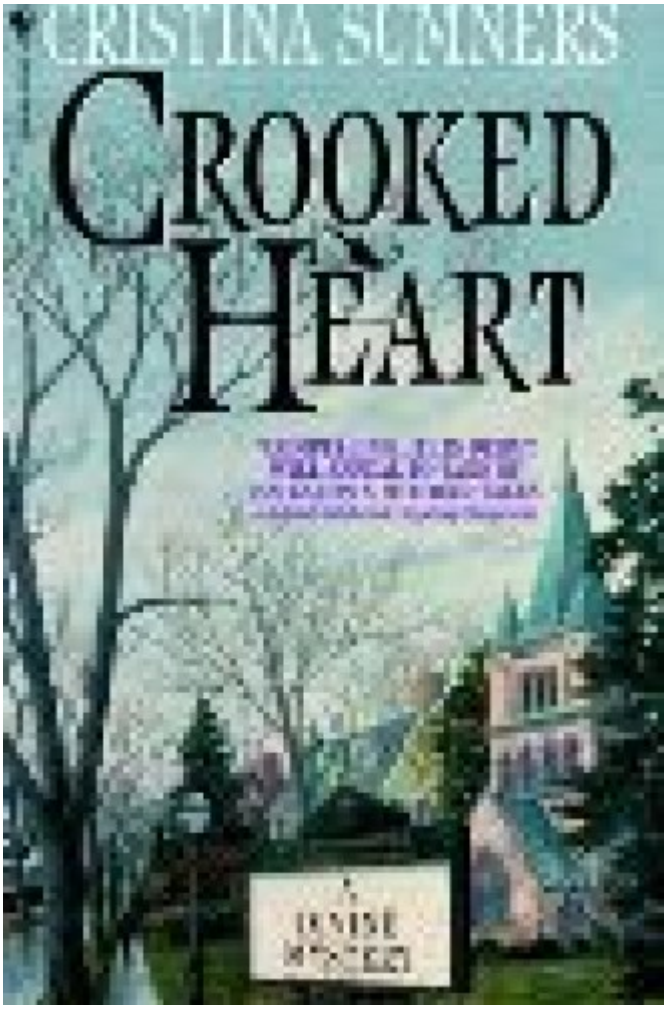
Mystery women

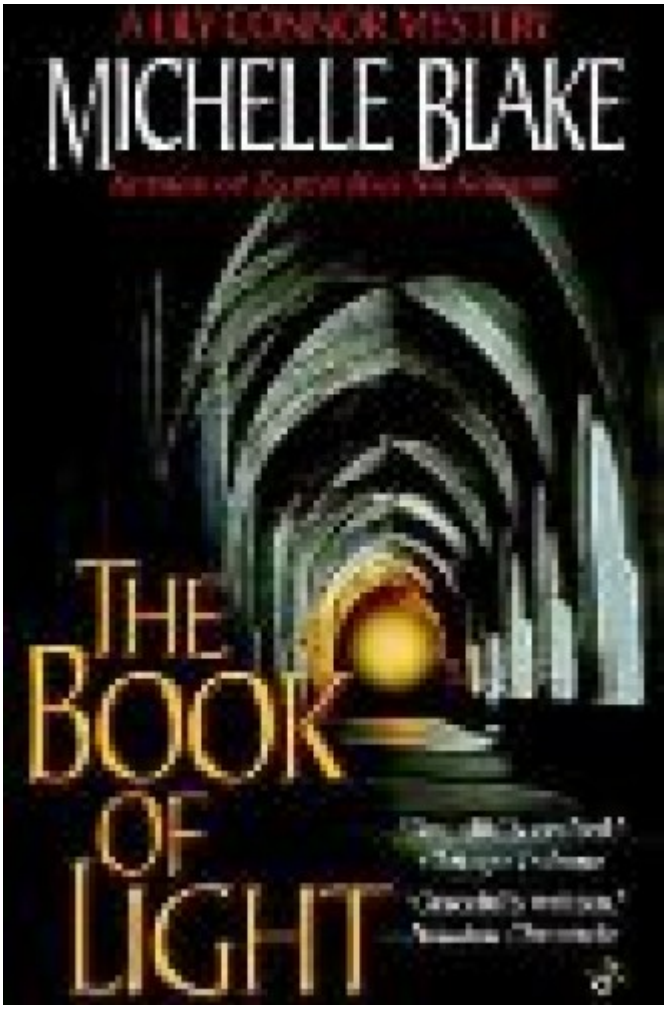
By Betty Smartt Carter in the October 19, 2004 issue

In Review



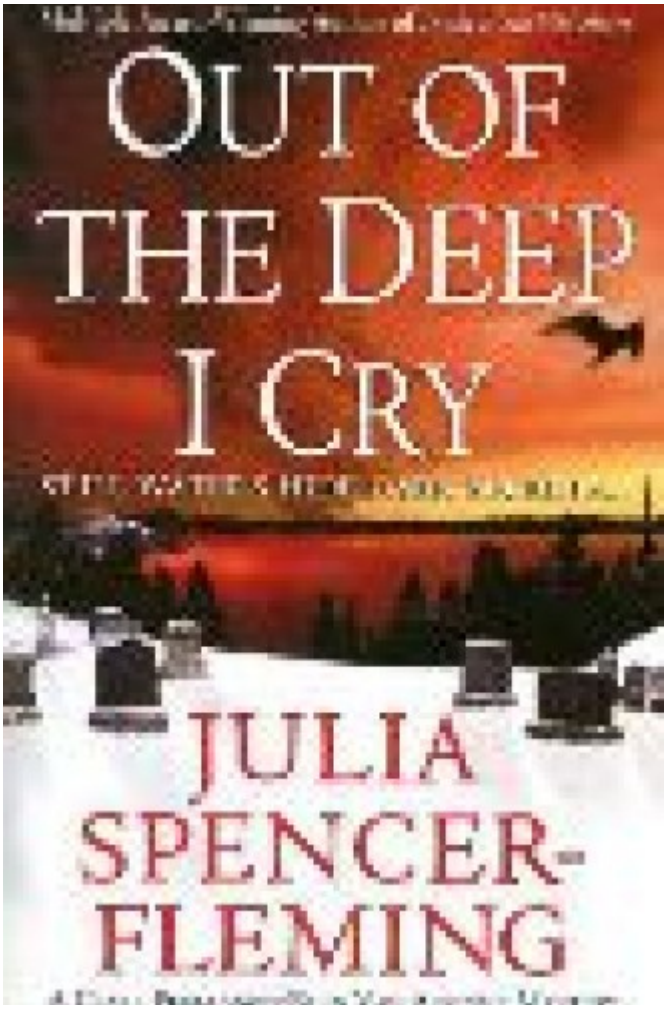
Crooked Heart

Cristina Sumners
Bantam



The Book of Light

Michelle Blake
Prime Crime



Out of the Deep I Cry

Julia Spencer-Fleming
St. Martin Minotaur

In the shadowy world of the mystery novel, nothing is ever quite what it appears to be, including the nature of justice itself. The justice on the surface of detective stories is earth-bound and human-centered. Fictional detectives mimic real-world investigators: their primary tools are science and psychology, not prayer or heavenly visions. You won’t find Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot conducting trials by ordeal, or P. D. James’s Adam Dalgliesh making suspects walk over hot coals to prove their innocence. Yet beneath the surface of every mystery lies a powerful, sustaining faith: that perfect justice is not only possible but inevitable. Truth and righteousness ultimately will prevail.

Even if we know that justice is far from inevitable here on earth, we are willing to suspend that knowledge when we read mysteries. In the real world we hope, but sometimes doubt, that good will triumph over evil. A mystery novel offers us a glimpse of the fulfillment of that hope: in the context of a story we observe the convergence of human and divine justice. A fictional detective becomes our appointed prophet-priest: through special knowledge, she deciphers the handwriting on the wall (or in the ransom note) and finds meaning in texts—perhaps telephone records. At the end of each story her conclusions are affirmed: the criminal confesses, or leaps from a bridge or drops a smoking gun.

Think of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes seeking enlightenment in an opium trance; of Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey meditating on a folio of Dante; or Agatha Christie's quiet Miss Marple hearing confessions at the tea table. These are priestly, sometimes monkish figures: brilliant eccentrics with the power to summon logic in the face of chaos. Lacking badges, side arms or fast cars, they fight crime by drawing on invisible fountains of intuition—what Poirot calls his "little grey cells," but what seem more like Delphic vapors. What is intuition but spiritual discernment, the prophetic gift?

Recently, three outstanding crime novelists have turned directly to the church for inspiration, presenting amateur detectives who are, in vocation as well as in spirit, priests. (Not that clergy have never before been portrayed as detectives—think of G. K. Chesterton's humble Father Brown, Ellis Peters's canny Brother Cadfael, or Brother William of Baskerville in Umberto Eco's marvelous *The Name of the Rose*.) The three priests in these new series have two things in common: they're all women, and they're all in love with their collaborators—who happen to be policemen. (And these priests, like the authors, are also all Episcopalians.)

In *Crooked Heart*, a first novel by Cristina Sumners (herself a parish priest), we meet Kathryn Koerney, rector of a small church in a New Jersey college town that resembles Princeton. Kathryn is a Lord Peter fan and shares some of that great detective's idiosyncrasies, including a cozy private fortune and a Bunter-like servant ("Warby") whom she treats as a friend rather than an employee. Kathryn's partner in crime-solving and, eventually, romance is Tom Holden, a policeman who happens to serve on her vestry.

The attraction is uneven at first. Tom, stuck in a bad marriage (to a daytime TV addict), quickly falls for his winsome new priest; but Kathryn finds Tom "as sexy as

Donald Duck.” It takes the strange disappearance and possible murder of a local woman to bring this unlikely pair together. As they uncover the facts of the crime and explore the dark mysteries of human nature, Tom and Kathryn feel a growing mutual respect, accompanied by the powerful stirrings of love. They’re flirting with danger, and they know it. When the mystery is solved, they walk off into the mist together—not to consummate their relationship, but to share a private Eucharist and a moment of spiritual reflection.

Michelle Blake’s *The Book of Light*, while less ecclesiastical in tone, presents more inherently religious themes. Lily Connor is the cowboy-boots-wearing chaplain at Boston’s Tate University (the author teaches at Tufts). One day Lily receives a visit from an old acquaintance, Samantha Lamb-Henderson, a well-known biblical scholar. Samantha has a big secret: an anonymous correspondent has informed her of the actual existence of Q—the hypothetical source for material in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Has the church deliberately hidden Q for 2,000 years, and, if so, why?

The ensuing intrigue involves guns, safe deposit boxes and mysterious deaths. The similarities to *The DaVinci Code* are obvious, though perhaps coincidental. Like the scholarly heroes of Dan Brown’s novel, Lily and her policeman lover (another Tom) face a secret society determined to maintain its hold on ecclesiastical power, no matter how many commandments it has to break to do so. While *The DaVinci Code* makes female sexuality the answer to nearly every riddle, *The Book of Light* gives us something less sensational and less predictable—a female mind. Lily’s preoccupations are moral and intellectual rather than erotic: she wants to know how to live—especially how to coexist with Christians on different sides of the theological spectrum. After she views the text of the sacred manuscript, she begins to experience miraculous changes in her own heart. For the first time she’s able to find patience and even sympathy for a conservative believer who shows up at her door.

Julia Spencer-Fleming’s *Out of the Deep I Cry* offers neither a plot dependent on religious questions nor parallels to current blockbusters. It may, however, be the most insightful and enjoyable of these three novels. Spencer-Fleming writes with uncommon sensitivity and depth.

In one of her previous mysteries, *A Fountain Filled with Blood*, she succeeded at a feat that’s been the ruin of many lesser writers, plunging headfirst into a current social issue (homophobia) without being swept away by it. Her saving grace there,

as in *Out of the Deep I Cry*, is her ability to create a story both intensely human and delightfully unpredictable, with events flowing naturally from collisions of character rather than the exigencies of plot. Such character-centered writing is a mark of good fiction in any genre, but in detective novels, where the author may feel enslaved to solution-hungry readers, it's especially rare.

Like Lily Connor and Kathryn Koerney, Clare Fergusson is a tomboy priest, a former army pilot who'd rather be out saving the world than raising funds to repair the roof of historic Millers Kill Episcopal Church. As it happens, Clare's fund-raising efforts set wheels of violence and tragedy in motion, stirring up the dust on the graves of four long-dead children and reviving old questions about their father's sudden disappearance. Clare is as brave as you'd expect a chopper pilot to be. In *A Fountain Filled with Blood*, she rescued the man she loves, policeman Russ Van Alstyne, from a helicopter crash. Here she and Russ make a narrow escape from a flooded cellar, but not before indulging in a much anticipated kiss. Yes, with hypothermia just a couple of degrees away, with water rising and no help in sight, Clare and Russ manage to forget about his wonderful wife (the woman he truly loves, the woman who helped him through posttraumatic stress syndrome) and finally give in to three novels' worth of lusty longing.

The parallels between these books are striking, especially the shared trope of the priest-policeman romance (a cliché has been born). This, of course, leads to all sorts of metaphorical coupling and conflict. The priest benefits practically from the policeman's civil authority (Clare gets to accompany Russ to crime scenes), while the detective draws on the priest's spiritual insight and her position in the community (when people have confessions to make, they naturally gravitate to priests). Each is physically attracted to the other and feels that the other completes a part of him- or herself that no one else can. But their worlds can't fully merge in this life, either because of family issues (Tom's family doesn't think he and Lily should be together; we're not told why) or because one of them is married and both think adultery is a sin. The consummation of the priest-policeman union must remain incomplete in order to survive as a metaphor. It's hard to imagine how Tom and Clare will follow up on their deep kiss.

Could it be that the writers (and some of us readers) want to avoid a choice between the amateur and the professional, between the representative of human justice (the street-smart cop) and the person devoted to divine justice (the priest)?

Since World War II, much of the detective genre has migrated toward realism. An army of police officers has marched forth to investigate the most sordid of crimes in the most up-to-date way. Sporting badges and guns rather than top hats and violins, they scour the darkest streets to investigate perverse murders perpetrated by killers who bear no resemblance at all to villains like Holmes's Moriarty.

And yet it's all just theater, this apparent realism. No matter how disgusting the crime or how common the murderer, the earthiness of the earthiest crime novel is a ruse. Human justice by itself can never guarantee that truth will triumph. Visions of truth must always come from elsewhere, whether they land upon trained detectives or amateurs, and the reader's faith that those visions will come is what makes crime fiction possible. The trend toward realism notwithstanding, the police haven't yet driven out the freelance genius, the inspired layman or laywoman, as solvers of mysteries and restorers of justice. Priestlike amateur detectives abound in bookstores, though they hardly exist outside them. Some policemen have apparently decided that if you can't beat them, you may as well join them. How convenient if the amateur happens to be female, single and sexy.

Which brings us to a disturbing question. Why do writers think readers will accept as a hero a female priest who flirts with a married man? Some may respond that priests are real people, after all, and real people have complicated desires and longings. Grace often comes through our frailties, and even sinful relationships can be redeeming. But however we might try to rationalize it, a strange dynamic seems to be afoot. It's as though the moral rules are different for female clergy. What if Kathryn Koerney were a married male priest flirting with a woman in his congregation? What if Clare Fergusson were a single male pastor (say, a Southern Baptist) having regular lunch dates with a married woman in his church and whispering double-entendres into the telephone?

We'd hardly accept such a hero. Indeed, we'd probably figure that he was the prime suspect in the case. In a woman priest we find ourselves able to overlook, even sympathize with, behavior that would appall us in a clergyman. We would accuse a male priest who behaved like this of being careless or selfish, of taking his vows lightly and even of abusing the power of his office.

Could it be that we haven't let our female heroes grow up? It's significant that the priests in these three novels all seem like underdogs, emotionally or socially uncertain. There's a girlishness about them that's attractive but also scary. Of

course, sexy vulnerability is almost a prerequisite for contemporary heroines. We can probably blame this image, like so many other things, on television and the movies, where crime-fighting women usually look appealing and dress seductively.

This combination of weakness and authority is troubling. It's as if we're supposed to see female clergy, shepherds of their churches, as lost sheep. Never fully at ease with ecclesiastical life (which in these books seems pretty awful), they find comfort in relationships with male authority figures. It's a double irony: while priests play detective, policemen play priest.

Yet there is also something positive about this invitation to readers to appreciate the human frailties of clerical detectives. The priests' shortcomings continually remind us that ultimate justice flows neither from human institutions nor ecclesiastical insight, nor even from the sensible practice of a moral life. It flows from God, in spite of human inconstancies and sometimes because of them. In fact, often when we're at our most stupid, God surprises us with visions of truth. That's a comforting thought, which should make us as humble as that wisest but most unassuming of all priestly detectives, Father Brown. As Chesterton once wrote (in a story called "The Queer Feet"), "his head was always most valuable when he had lost it. In such moments he put two and two together and made four million."