

# Crime in the Library

## A preliminary excursus

On 27 March **Graham Dudley**, Manager of the Public Libraries Unit of Arts Victoria gave a talk to the Friends of the Library

Why is it that libraries are seen as a typical locale for a crime, most often murder? “The public image of the library is generally that of a quiet, comfortable, inviting place, a place where people read and study, and certainly a place where people and their belongings should be safe.” (Lincoln p. ix) Is it because of this warm, comfortable image that the eruption of fictitious crime, often violent, often deadly, is attractive to authors?

Real crime, ranging from petty vandalism to theft and beyond, is a problem in libraries as Lincoln demonstrates and as any practicing librarian will bear witness. However, I am not aware of any actual murders being committed. So let us turn to fiction.

Today I want to take a not-too-serious look at fiction works involving libraries and crime, usually murder but also ranging across other licit or illicit activities. The reading list that has been distributed does not claim to be comprehensive, but merely lists titles of which I am aware. Additions are most welcome.

My talk will concentrate on libraries and librarians working mainly in publicly funded libraries, especially in universities and local communities (the public library). However, other types of libraries will be covered where material exists.

This topic is part of a much larger genre, that of biblio-murder or biblio-mysteries. A look, for example, at sections on these topics in Kay Craddock’s catalogues will illustrate the point. There are crime and murder stories involving booksellers, authors,

publishers, newspaper staff, bibliophiles, and of course books and manuscripts themselves.

The body in the library is a cliché for a crime scene in the stately country home in one of the better counties of England. The library features on the ever popular Cluedo board game. Picture the scene - the body of the baronet lies on the carpet or slumped over the desk, skewered by the exotic Damascened dagger brought back from a visit to the Holy Land by Cousin Augusta, or run through with the assegai, a souvenir of Great Uncle Rupert’s foray into the Zulu wars. The weapon is always conveniently to hand. Here, the library often serves as a backdrop - the victim happened to be there at the right, or wrong, time depending on one’s perspective. Did he disturb someone hunting for the lost will or the incriminating letter hidden amongst the volumes?

An example of this approach, and the only one I wish to talk about in detail, is by the “Queen Of Crime” herself, Dame Agatha Christie, entitled *The Body in the Library*. This work, which was first published in 1942, features Miss Marple as the sleuth. In her foreword, Christie herself acknowledges that she is working within a cliché. For her “variation on a well-known theme”, Christie uses a “highly orthodox and conventional library” as the setting, but the body “on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body”. Here is the library:

The library was a room very typical of its owners. It was large and shabby and untidy. It had big sagging armchairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big



table. There were one or two good old family portraits on the walls, and some bad Victorian water colours, and some would-be-funny hunting scenes.

Here is the body :

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface... The fingernails were enamelled in deep blood-red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes.

Christie, having set up the paradox, then exploits it with all her consummate skills. It transpires that the Colonel’s library is merely the second and final resting place for the body. The girl was, in fact, murdered elsewhere and left, in the first instance, in the house of another local resident. It was this person, a rebel

and non-conformist, who decided to remove the body to the library. The book is still worth reading, though I found its casual assumptions about social classes and people somewhat grating.

I now wish to turn to the other libraries, those attached to universities, schools or run by municipal councils, and of course to their staff. May I begin by drawing your attention to a delightful survey called *Booked for Murder* by Betty Rosenberg, published in 1979 by the Battledore Press in California. This chapbook, of one hundred copies, is a lighthearted but shrewd look at libraries and murder. I am deeply indebted to Patricia Miller, a student of Rosenberg's, for allowing me to access her copy, possibly the only one in Australia. Rosenberg lists twelve titles, published from the 1940s to the 1970s involving librarians or libraries and crime. All titles are listed in the reading guide.

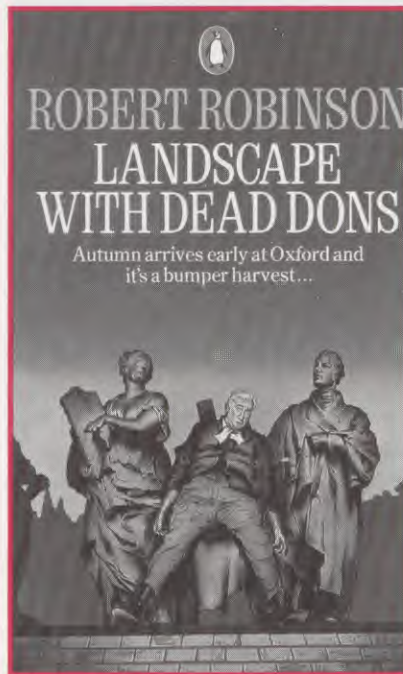
Nearly all the titles we will be looking at originate in the United States, with a few from the United Kingdom. There are lone examples from Australia, France and Italy. The first question that occurred to me was "why the preponderance of US titles?" Do Americans see their libraries in a different light to other countries, or are crimes in America so widespread that libraries, along with other venues, have their fair share of the action? I do not really know!

To stay in England for the moment, I want to turn to a work by a favourite author of mine, Michael Innes (or J.I.M. Stewart). *Operation Pax* was first published in 1951 and features Innes' detective, Sir John Appleby. The story revolves around the activities at the Milton Manor Clinic, into which a hapless conman blunders. The clinic, ostensibly treating alcoholics from well connected families, is near Oxford and the Bodleian Library plays no small part in the plot.

*Operation Pax* is replete with Innes' characteristic love of word play and punning names, and has a cast of well-drawn Oxford dons and others, including Bodley's Librarian, with his three pairs of spectacles.

The plot centres on the theft, by the conman, of a vital scientific formula, and the chase for its recovery by the police, the clinic staff and a troop of local children. The conman flees into the Bodleian, and hides the formula in a book of eighteenth century theology being used by Dr Undertone. The Library is lovingly described:

In a university, as in the republic of literature, extreme longevity is a prerequisite of the first eminence; and in Bodley... the pursuit of learning has for so long transacted itself... as to have generated a peculiar aura but also an indescribable smell. As long as this smell endures, Oxford will endure too... But if this smell evaporated it would be a sign that the soul of Oxford had departed its tenement of grey, eroded stone, and that only its shell, its only tangible and visible surfaces, remained.



The climax of the book is the hunt, in the underground stacks of the Bodleian, for the book with the formula in it. The hunt is described very much like a caving expedition, and indeed, two of the protagonists come into the Library through an external entrance leading through a natural cave. The description of the underground stacks reads like a description of a Piranesi drawing. The book is found, the guilty party, a scientist gone wrong, falls to his death, breaking his neck and all ends well. In a

typical Innes touch the title of the book is finally revealed: "A Thunderbolt of Wrath against stiff-necked and impenitent sinners".

Another book set in Oxford is Robert Robinson's *Landscape with Dead Dons*, written in 1956. Nicholas Flower, a key character in the plot, enters the Bodleian:

Flower walked into Bodley and inhaled deeply. The smell was like a cupboard of old boots, but today Flower decided it was the odour of wisdom.

The book has two plots running through it: firstly the murders of the Master and Chaplain of Warlock College; and secondly, the vandalism of rare works in the Bodleian. It is discovered in due course that the occurrences of vandalism are tied in with a smuggling racket involving pornographic material, which is stored in the Bodleian stacks:

'The safest place in all England to stow a load of pornography because it's cram full of it already!' Archangel laughed. 'A copy of every book published goes there under that law of Seventeen-something you know - every book, whether Dostoyevsky or de Sade. A thousand or so extra volumes simply wouldn't be noticed - or if they were it would be assumed that they had not yet been catalogued.'

The two plots come together beautifully. There is a hilarious chase sequence involving a large number of naked men down the High Street. A newly found manuscript of an unknown poem by Chaucer is a forgery, made by the importer of pornography. The two murder victims had discovered this and were killed by the don who actually wrote the text. The destruction of the books is a cover to help speed the acceptance of the manuscript, the argument being that if the physical safety of books is being threatened, the contents are less likely to be closely examined. This title is highly recommended.

We now cross the Atlantic to the United States. I want to look at works by four authors, three using public libraries and librarians and the other set in a research library.

Jo Dereske is a newcomer to the crime writing scene, but has fast

established herself with three titles involving a librarian sleuth, Miss Helma Zukas. Miss Zukas is the nonfiction history and applied sciences librarian at the Bellhaven Public Library in Washington State.

I have a feeling that most of us have met someone like Miss Zukas: somewhat reserved, even undemonstrative, intolerant of fools, a stickler for propriety, methodical and lover of order, peace and tidiness. Her sidekick and friend in the adventures is an old school friend, Ruth Winthrop, who is the complete opposite of Helma, which, incidentally, is derived from Miss Zukas' given name, Wilhelmina. Ruth is an artist, flamboyant, disorganised, passionately interested in men and physically striking. Both friends are in their late thirties.

Here is Helma Zukas responding to a question from the Chief of Police, after a body is discovered in the library:

'I'm much too busy to notice the interactions between patrons of the library. The Bellhaven Public Library is the busiest library, per capita, in the State. We're underfunded, short staffed, threatened by budget cuts.'

The three titles by Deresky are: *Miss Zukas and the Library Murders*; *Miss Zukas and the Island Murders*; and *Miss Zukas and the Stroke of Death*. Two of her books, *Library Murders* and *The Stroke of Death* have librarians as the murderers.

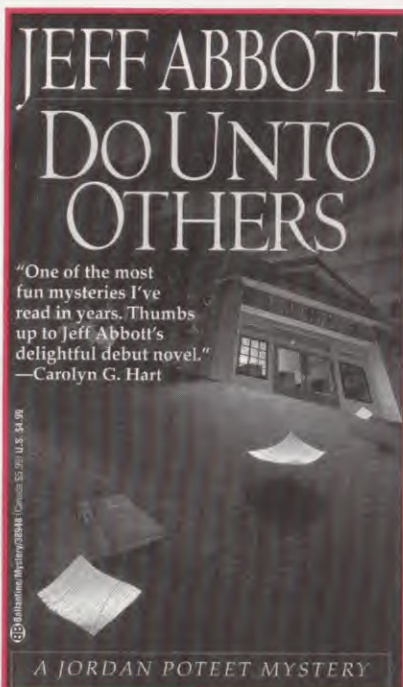
In *Miss Zukas and the Library Murders* a corpse is discovered in the Bellhaven Public Library. Helma and Ruth become involved in the investigations, eventually to the risk of their lives. The murderer is exposed as, in fact, the Chief Librarian at Bellhaven, Albert Upman. Here is Ruth's description of Upman:

What a waste to have the brain of a Marx Brothers librarian connected to the body of an Olympic marathoner.

Upman, who is an impostor and not a librarian, has been involved in industrial espionage, and has been using library books as a way to hand over stolen microchips incorporating state-of-the-art

computer technology. The chips are embedded in the security tags of books which are checked out by a courier. The murder victim is in fact a courier who was becoming too greedy and is stabbed with a rod from a catalogue card drawer.

In *Miss Zukas and the Stroke of Death*, the murder victim is found outside Ruth's house. The tracking down of the murderer by Helma and Ruth,



occasionally working with the Police, is also tied in with Helma's participation as a library team member in the annual Bellhaven Snow to Surf multi-sports competition. I should add that Bellhaven Public Library is now managed by Ms Moon who is heavily into new age philosophies. For example, she does not have staff meetings but "harmony circles". Behind her back, she is called Moonbeam by the staff.

The murdered man turns out to have been a wife beater and possibly a wife killer, and guilty of incest. The murderer, a close friend of the late wife, is revealed to be another staff member at the library, Patrice, who is in charge of non fiction : social sciences and periodicals. A description of Patrice:

Patrice had worked under three directors and was nearing retirement, although she'd flatly stated that she had no intention of

retiring as long as she could perform her job, a subject that was already a matter of some speculation. Eve, who was somehow oblivious to Patrice's frequent barbs, felt sorry for her. She's afraid of retiring. All she's got is that little old French poodle," Eve said sorrowfully.

The murder, by strangulation, is committed with the poodle's leash. Interestingly, Helma, for all her love of order and tidiness, decides not to reveal the identity of the murderer. All Deresky's books are highly recommended.

Another public library, this time deep in the heart of Texas, is the setting for murder in Jeff Abbott's *Do Unto Others*, his first work. Again we see the librarian, Jordan Poteet, as the detective. Miz Beta Harcher, town bigot and religious fanatic, is found murdered in the public library. Poteet is the chief suspect. He comments on Harcher's death : "The woman acted like she had a toll free line to Jesus, so you'd think she would have been forewarned of her fate". Abbot writes well. The descriptions of the small-town library and the sleepy little Texas town ring true. Here is the library :

In Mirabeau three's literally a crowd, so we had ourselves a horde that morning. Old men sat in the periodical section, slowly scanning the papers and frowning over progress. A couple of book-minded youths from the high school fed their spring break reading habits in the science-fiction section. In the most distant corner of the library, the gossipy ladies of the Eula Mae Quiff Literary Society (led by the one and only Eula Mae herself) quietly pretended to discuss the latest offerings in romance literature while chatting about their neighbours. All in all, a quiet group, idling away several hours in the coolness of the books and avoiding the smothering spring humidity.

The characterisation of Beta Harcher is first class. Unfortunately there are too many such would-be book burners around. Harcher turns out to be a multiple blackmailer, and is killed by one of her victims, the Baptist minister's wife whose adultery Beta had discovered.

The story is closely plotted, perhaps too much so. I feel that there is material in this work for at least two books. Poteet comes across as a well-rounded, all too human person and, perhaps, more

attractive than Miss Helma Zukas, about whom I detect just a hint of caricature.

A public librarian also features in Ralph McInerney's *Second Vespers*, published in 1980. It is part of a series involving a priest-detective, Father Roger Dowling. McInerney is an historian and philosopher and holds a chair in Medieval Studies at Notre Dame University. Those of McInerney's books which I have read, I have found most enjoyable.

*Second Vespers* revolves around the thriving business that has grown-up in the town of Fox River centring on the papers of the late Francis O'Rourke, a noted American author. There is great interest in O'Rourke's unpublished letters, journals, and his friendship with locals when living in Fox River.

The librarian, Jim Feehan, who also writes the literary pages for the local newspaper is heavily involved in the O'Rourke business. The plot is a complex one, revolving around a son of O'Rourke's who comes searching for relics of his father, whom he never knew and whose posthumous fame he both envies and despises. Feehan, the librarian, who trades on a fictitious boyhood friendship with O'Rourke, becomes involved. Feehan has forged some four dozen letters supposed written to him by O'Rourke. Feehan is not a nice person, bigoted, intolerant, jealous of others' successes, and using the forged letters to win sexual favours from naive women. Here are two quotations about Feehan the librarian:

The librarian's creative memory produced some accounts of episodes when he and Frank O'Rourke had fished in Fox River, had walked home from school together, had vied for the same girl-friend, and so on. The very banality of these stories convinced most people of their truth and even Julian reluctantly admitted that Feehan must have known Frank O'Rourke when the two of them were young lads in Fox River.

A librarian is never seen entering a bar and a newspaperman is seldom seen leaving one. Between the Scylla and Charybdis of these conflicting ideals, Jim Feehan manoeuvred his carefully crafted persona that was no stranger to difficult waters. Fox River still bore traces of an earlier time when

librarians, like teachers and some others on the public payroll, were expected to be paragons of morality, morality being defined in a generally negative way. Above all: no drinking.

O'Rourke's sister is murdered. Literary relics are stolen from several places, including the church. Father Dowling sees through the smoke screens and false leads and deduces the correct sequences of events, which hold surprises right up to the last page. Highly recommended.

*Dewey Decimated*, by Charles Goodrun, then Deputy Librarian of Congress, was the first library murder story I read, courtesy of Juliet Fleisch, and it remains a firm favourite. It is set in the Werner-Bok Library, a research institution and the world's richest library. In this story, the murders, the place and its collection are interlinked in a way unlike any other stories, with the exception of *The Name of the Rose*, to which I shall return shortly.

Let us open with a description of the Manuscripts and Rare Books Library. I am tempted to say - only in America!

The room itself was known as the Chapter House and was a grand-scale reproduction of a medieval meeting room eclectically plagiarised from three Plantagenet monasteries. It stood two and a half floors high with carved oak ceiling and hammer beams. It had linenfold panels, Norman stained glass, a slate floor, and the place even smelled of unvarnished wood and candlewax. The ambience was overwhelming and doubly amazing since this huge, carved box was supported on three sides and bottom by layers of steel book decks and twentieth-century security devices.

The trio of detectives are Edward George, a retired librarian, Steve Carson, a young researcher and Betty Crichton-Jones, the Library's PR officer. In a short space of time, both the head of the Manuscripts Division and the rare books binder are murdered. Poison pen letters are circulating about the authenticity of some of the Library's greatest treasures - its Wycliffe and Gutenberg Bibles amongst others.

George and the police officer are discussing the murders. George makes a very interesting statement, which is

worth quoting, not only for its importance in the plot, but also for broader truths. Firstly the police officer:

'The idea of a bunch of librarians getting that worked up over their jobs is a little hard to swallow. Believe me, I've been in this business too long already, but the number of these that can't be explained by money, booze, or sex you can put in your eye.'

George continued somewhat tensely. 'I beg you not to take this so cavalierly. The stereotypes of the librarian are mousy, frightened men or neurotic old maids who hide in the Library, too paralyzed with their own inadequacies to hurt anyone. It is questionable whether this was ever true, but it is certainly not true today. The people who work here are leading experts in their fields. They are both jealous of their reputations and ambitious for their futures.... Believe me, by the time you're finished, I think you will find warped professionalism in some way at the bottom of this.'

In many ways, I feel the comment about stereotypes lies behind why libraries have been chosen as murder and crime scenes. People do not associate murder with somewhere as friendly and welcoming, as unthreatening as a library.

After several twists and turns, the plot comes to its climax in the stacks of the Library, in a scene reminiscent of Innes. The murderer is the second-in-charge of the Rare Books Division. The two murder victims were aware of his infamous scheme, whereby he was taking perfect copies of rare items from the Library's collection and substituting tattered copies obtained from old New England libraries. One motive, revealed just before he suicides is interesting.

That was the beauty of the thing! The little libraries never really missed the books because they were so old and faded they needed new copies anyway, and the substitution here put mint copies back in the hands of collectors where they belonged. It's inexcusable to bury really rare volumes in institutions. I was liberating the prisoners and returning them to the hands which would love them.

The other motive, was pure greed, for the money and good things it bought with it. So, both the librarian and the policeman were partly right.

*The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto

Eco, is well known both as a book and as a film, starring Sean Connery. The large, multi-layered work is set in a Benedictine monastery in Italy in the year 1327.

The detective is a Franciscan friar, Brother William of Baskerville, assisted by the young Benedictine novice Adso of Melk. Here is Adso's description of William:

Brother William's physical appearance was at that time such as to attract the attention of the most inattentive observer. His height surpassed that of a normal man and he was so thin that he seemed still taller. His eyes were sharp and penetrating; his thin and slightly beaky nose gave his countenance the expression of a man on the lookout, save in certain moments of sluggishness of which I shall speak. His chin also denoted a firm will, though the long face.....could occasionally express hesitation and puzzlement.

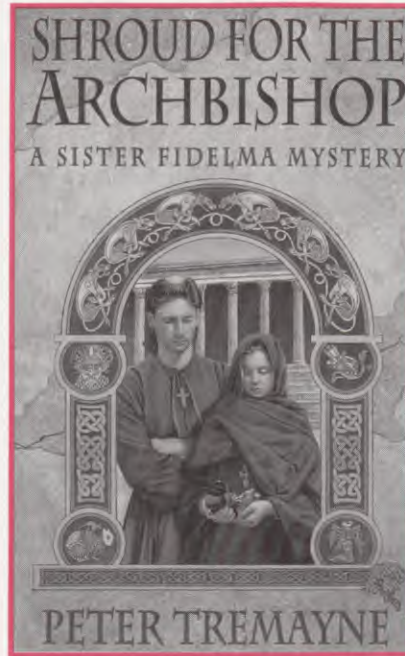
Here is another description:

His very person and appearances were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height, he was rather over six feet and so excessively lean that he seemed considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination.

This second description is not, in fact, of Brother William, but of Sherlock Holmes, as given by Dr John H Watson MD, in *A Study of Scarlet*, set ca 1881/82. Of course, William's place of origin, "Baskerville", is the give-away. *The Name of the Rose* has scattered through it references and allusions to Conan Doyle's great detective. Adso of Melk, however, is not really a prototype of Dr Watson!

The story is concerned with, amongst other things, the nature of belief and heresy, the perennial battle between Empire and Papacy, the question of whether Christ ever laughed, and at the heart, the layout and contents of the magnificent library. The description of the scriptorium is quite superb, though too long to give here.

The murder part of the story, which concerns us here, revolves around deaths of several of the library staff, some



showing signs of poisoning around the tongue and the mouth. Eventually, William and Adso penetrate the library-cum-labyrinth, the layout of which I shall not even attempt to summarise. The secrets of the library are passed by word of mouth, from each librarian to his chosen successor. The plot twists and turns, to reach its climax one night in the library, where William and Adso confront Jorge of Burgos, an old blind monk who was, it transpires, the monastery's librarian until his eyesight failed. Jorge has an anathema against laughter - "Laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh" he says. The manuscript which is the key to the plot is written not on vellum but on linen paper, the corners of which Jorge has smeared with a deadly poison. Readers, finding the pages stuck together, instinctively moisten their fingers and turn the pages and then remoisten their fingers and so transfer the poison to their tongue and mouth. The book is Aristotle's second book of *Poetics*, long believed lost, in which he deals with comedy and laughter. Jorge proceeds to tear up the manuscript and to eat the pages. William and Adso try to prevent this, but in the scuffle that ensues a lamp is knocked over and the library and the whole monastery are consumed by flames.

So here we have perhaps the



ultimate. The book itself is the murder weapon.

The final work I want to discuss is an evocative new novel, *Shroud for the Archbishop*, by Peter Tremayne, the second mystery involving Sister Fidelma, an Irish religieuse. *Shroud* is set in Rome in 664 AD and is built around the visit to Rome of Wighard, Archbishop designate of Canterbury.

The Archbishop and two of his entourage are garrotted by their prayer cords and valuable church treasures are

stolen. Sister Fidelma has a gift for detective work and is a most forthright and determined person. She is a strong advocate for an equal place for women in the life of the church.

It is worth remembering that, at this time, Church rules concerning both priestly celibacy and the place of women had not become rigidly fixed. Also, Sister Fidelma represents the separate, Celtic, stream of Christianity, which was at variance with Rome in many important areas.

Here is Sister Fidelma:

The door opened and a tall figure in the robes of a religieuse entered. ... The woman crossed the mosaic floor of the hall with a youthful spring to her step that seemed at odds with the demure posture required by the religious habit.

Sister Fidelma is asked to investigate the murder of Wighard and the theft, for as she says of herself:

I am not only a religieuse but a dálaigh of the Brehon Court of Ireland...that is, I am an advocate tutored in both the code of civil law of the Senchus Mór and of the criminal law of the Leabhar Acaill by which our country is governed by justice.

She is also the daughter and sister of the Kings of Cashel and Munster.

It turns out that the murders are separate to the robberies. The latter concern us, for they were committed by an Alexandrian Greek physician to pay for the purchase of valuable medical manuscripts, by Hippocrates, Herophilus and Galen of Pergamum and others. These manuscripts were looted from the great Alexandrian Library which had fallen into Muslim hands some twenty years before.

Exactly what happened to the Alexandrian Library is an interesting point in itself, and I commend to you the seminal article by Anne Holmes, listed in the reading guide. *Shroud for the Archbishop* is an entertaining and well crafted novel which is highly recommended.

The greatest library of antiquity is also, I think, a good place to end this excursus. ♦

## Crime in the Library

A reading List compiled by Graham N. Dudley

**This list does not pretend to be complete. Nor have I been able to sight all titles listed below. Additions are most welcome.**

### Fact

- Holmes, Anne**                      *The Alexandrian Library - Libri* v.30, no.4  
**Lincoln, Alan Jay**                *Crime in the Library; a study of patterns, impact and security.* New York, Bowker, 1984.  
**Rosenberg, Betty**                 *Booked for Murder.* Glendale, Cal., The Battledore Press, 1979.

### Fiction

- Abbot, Jeff**                         *Do Unto Others.* New York, Ballantine, 1994  
**Blackstock Charity**               *Dewey Death.* Heineman, 1956  
**Bleek, Oscar,**                      *No Questions Asked.* Morrow, 1976  
**Bosse, Malcolm**                 *The Man Who Loved Zoos.* Putnam, 1974  
**Boyd, Marion,**                    *Murder in the Stacks.* Lothrop, 1934  
**Christie, Agatha**                 *The Body in the Library.* London, Collins, 1943  
**Daly, Elizabeth**                 *Night Walk.* Rinehart, 1974  
**Deresky, Jo**                         *Miss Zukas and the Library Murders.* New York, Avon Books, 1994  
    *Miss Zukas and the Island Murders.* New York, Avon Books, 1994  
    *Miss Zukas and the Stroke of Death.* New York, Avon Books, 1995  
**Dolson, Hildegarde,**             *Please Omit Funeral.* Lippincott, 1975  
**Eco, Umberto**                     *The Name of the Rose.* New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983  
**Goodrum, Charles A**             *Dewey Decimated.* New York, Crown, 1977  
**Hyland, Stanley**                 *Who Goes Hang?* London, Gollancz, 1958  
**Innes, Michael**                 *Operation Pax.* London, Gollancz, 1951 (also in Penguin paperbacks)  
**Johnson, W.**                      *The Widening Stain.* New York, Knopf, 1942  
    *Transcendental Murder.* Harper, 1964  
**Langton, Jane**                     *Aladdin et le Crime de la Bibliothèque.* Paris, Syros, 1993  
    (for teenage readers)  
**McInerney, Ralph**               *Second Vespers.* New York, Vanguard, 1980  
**Peters, Elizabeth**               *The Seventh Sinner.* Dodd, 1974 (Peters has written several novels with Jacqueline Kirby, a librarian, as detective)  
**Robinson, Robert**               *Landscape With Dead Dons.* London, Gollancz, 1956 (also in Penguin paperbacks)  
**Striker, Lee**                       *Revenge of the Vampire Librarian.* Sydney, Red Fox, 1995  
    (for teenage readers)  
**Tremayne, Peter**                 *Shroud for the Archbishop.* London, Headline, 1995