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Edgar Award Nominees, 2011, and the Impact of the Internet, Part II

Jeffrey Barlow

This is the second part of a recent article posted in Interface for March. ¹ Because it is so highly opinionated on a topic regarding which many will argue, we treat it as an editorial and as a partial review of five books, each a nominee for the Edgar Allan Poe awards for best mystery novel in 2011. A sixth, Harlan Coben’s Caught was reviewed earlier.

This editorial is related to a series of pieces analyzing the impact of the Internet through an examination of detective or mystery fiction. These works were selected because their quality had been affirmed by their nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe award.² As the winners for works published in 2011 will be named on April 28, we wanted to finish our discussion of them prior to that event.

Our methodology is a very simple one. We are interested, almost solely, in how the authors incorporate (or inappropriately ignore) the Internet in constructing their plots. This is a particularly useful approach for evaluating the impact of the Internet because, by its nature, the genre of mystery or detective fiction is most often focused on missing information. Usually that information is the identity of the perpetrator or criminal. The slang title for these works, “whodunit,” is particularly appropriate.

The advent of the Internet has complicated mystery plotting because so much more information is available to both the sleuth and the reader. The reader is not likely to remain long interested in a detective who is too dumb to take the obvious first step in any research—going on line for related information. Authors then, either must utilize the Internet in an appropriate fashion, or ignore it convincingly.

We have now read all of the nominees for Best Novel, and most of those nominated for Best First Novel. We will comment upon this latter category after

² To see the Edgar award site, go to: http://www.theedgars.com/index.html
we know who the winner is. Reading ten mystery novels between January 19 when the list was announced and the present was simply too much of a distraction from other work, perhaps because we so enjoy the project and the research.

There were six works nominated for the Best Novel of 2011:

- Harlan Coben’s *Caught* (reviewed earlier)
- Tom Franklin’s *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*
- Tana French’s *Faithful Place.*
- Hallinan’s *The Queen of Patpong*
- Steve Hamilton’s *The Lock Artist*
- Laura Lippman’s *I’d Know You Anywhere*

Each one of these works was good material to advance our understanding of the Internet because none was set in a time period before it developed. This is somewhat unusual when compared to previous lists of nominees, which almost always include at least one work set in an earlier historical period.

In our previous posting, we discussed Coben’s *Caught* in tandem with a work from the list of Best First Work nominees, David Gordon’s *The Serialist: A Novel.* Of Coben’s *Caught*, we wrote:

> ...so far as making good use of the Internet and constructing a plot around such timely issues as identity theft and on-line bullying...the work is certainly a major contender.

Here we discuss the other works, and conclude with some generalizations and nominate our personal choice for the Edgar.

Two of the works, while not completely set in a time before the Internet, split the time frame. The earlier frame in which the crimes occur is pre-Internet. The later frame is a post-internet period when the earlier events are still having repercussions, in one case because the crime has not yet been solved.

Steve Hamilton’s *The Lock Artist* is one of these. It is a fascinating work, if only, because the protagonist is certainly a unique voice: he is a mute world-class safe cracker. The metaphor of locks is consistent throughout: the narrator is mute because he was himself locked up under very traumatic circumstance, after which he is simply unable to speak. Hamilton brings alive the protagonist’s strange world as well as explaining the technology of locks, and of opening them,

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3 The see the entire list of nominees, together with summaries and links to useful reviews, go to the appendix to this piece found at: [http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=800](http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=800)

4 Again, the review is found at: [http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=779](http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=779)
in an extremely lively fashion. Here is one brief paragraph—some of the descriptions go on for pages—

I set the back pin, started working my way to the front. All six pins set, go to the back again, set them all again. Here’s where you have to be so careful, just enough tension to keep everything in place. One tiny bit too little and you lose it, one tiny bit too much and you can’t feel it anymore. I worked through the second sets, got to the exact point I had gotten to before, with the locksmith laughing over my shoulder. This time I knew to keep going. Back pin again, third set. Work my way to the front. Damn, it was like balancing a house of cards. You have to keep going, but it gets harder and harder with each one, and one false move makes it all fall apart. I got almost to the end of the third sets, lost the tension, and felt the back pins start to give. So hard to keep the front pin set and to go back and fix the back. I let the whole thing go, took a deep breath, shook out my hands, and looked around the empty backyard.  

This all occurs in 1999, at a time when there is no necessity of explaining the fact that the Internet is not a factor in transferring information. By the later time frame, 2008, the protagonist has been again locked away from access to the Internet. As interesting as it is, then, The Lock Artist is irrelevant to our analysis.

Tom Franklin’s Crooked Letter, begins in 1979 when two boys are working out a very restricted version of friendship because one, Larry, is White, the other, Silas, is Black, and they live in a very racist southern culture. The White is accused of being responsible for the disappearance of a girl and his life is pretty much destroyed, though nothing can be proven due to the lack of a body or any other useful evidence. Their friendship ends and Silas continues on to become a successful college athlete and then Constable in his old hometown, getting his job over the Internet.

The time frame then jumps to an unspecified present when email is common and so is the Internet. Silas gets caught up once more in the old case involving Larry when other girls disappear. Because the setting remains deliberately isolated and by implication backward, we do not really think much about the Internet, nor about serial killer databases, or any other attribute of digital technology.

This is the second time in our process of analyzing mystery novels that we have seen what we now think of as the “Trope of the Backward South”, in which the isolation of rural communities which are often also the scene of racially-motivated violence allows an author to finesse issues of Internet use by playing

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5 The Lock Artist: A Novel (Steve Hamilton)- Highlight Loc. 3589-3617
upon our stereotypes of rural areas. This is, of course, ultimately illogical because the Internet is now ubiquitous, particularly in law enforcement agencies, no matter how isolated or Faulknerian the site.

Nonetheless, Tom Franklin’s Crooked Letter, is very well done and fully worthy of its Edgar nomination.

Timothy Hallinan’s The Queen of Patpong is one of two of the 2011 Edgar nominations which are set in a country other than the United States, in this case, Thailand. Admittedly I have a special interest in books set in Thailand, perhaps because I have been there just often enough to recognize locale and culture, but am not so familiar with it that I can really afford to be critical of the author’s own understanding of the them.

One of the advantages of a Thai setting is that it gives an author an opportunity to present a radically non-Western worldview, particularly in matters of spirituality and sexuality. Hallinan makes excellent use of these differences, presenting us with an ex-patriot protagonist, Poke Rafferty, who lives within a Thai family structure while remaining sufficiently American to be a useful foil to Thai values.

The book itself is excellent. The author’s forte is character development and good use of the colorful locale as well as the very broad ethical structure of the locals, which permits them to move easily from high-class prostitute to loving and fiercely loyal girl friends or wives as useful to the plot.

Here the Internet is available, but not so available as to simplify the plot before the author can build suspense. The trope here is very much “Deus Ex Machina”: the Internet is shut safely away until it can be trotted out at critical moments to resolve plot points or to carry them forward. The means of doing this is to have waiting in the off-stage area a very well-connected American intelligence agent who can, reluctantly, periodically feed critical information to the protagonist from databases to which only he has access.

We are trying, as best we can, to avoid plot spoilers here, but we can say that the identity of the criminal, a serial killer of Thai prostitutes, probably could have been resolved much earlier with a really thorough Google search. The emotionally satisfactory conclusion in which he is undone could have been much

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6 The first such use of this trope was in John Hart’s work, The Last Child at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/article.php?id=728
7 See, for example, our review of John Burdett’s Bangkok Haunts at http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/04/burdett.php. There we used the work to illuminate issues dealing with pornography as well as reviewing it for its use of the Internet.
more easily accomplished with the Thai equivalent of twitter than was the case. Nonetheless, this is another piece of excellent work.

Tana French’s *Faithful Place* is, like Hallinan’s *The Queen of Patpong*, set outside the United States, in this case, in Ireland. The protagonist is Frank Mackey, a member of the Dublin Police forces’ elite undercover squad. French, like all of the nominees for Best Book, has published more than one novel, and like Coben is a multiple nominee for the award.

French’s setting of Ireland is not the happy Emerald Isle beloved of Irish-American lore, but a poverty stricken part of Dublin inhabited by radically dysfunctional families. The work open in 1985, when Rose, the youthful love of Mackey’s life, disappears on the evening the two were to run away to London, free of their families and the suffocating puritanical culture of Ireland at that time. When she does not show up for their rendezvous, he chooses to believe that she simply decided that her chances were better without him, and did not truly love him as he loved her.

Twenty-two years later her body is found in the basement of the deserted tenement where they had regularly trysted, and where she had agreed to meet him. Now we are fully in the age of the Internet. Even Mackey’s nine-year old daughter Holly is a skilled computer user who IM’s with other children, and Mackey has access to all the digital panoply of police tools.

This is an excellent book. Ms. French moves as well as does any writer between male and female voices; her protagonist Mackey is charming, devious, or brutal as required. The material culture of poverty-stricken Dublin is so well written that you feel you know even Mackey’s marginally sane Irish catholic mother (his father, aided by drink, crossed over the borderline of sanity even before Rosy disappeared). The language of the characters is wonderful, my on-line Kindle dictionary while necessary, also failed repeatedly to turn up definitions of some of the language. ²

The neighborhood itself becomes almost the chief suspect so mired is the crime in the complex relationships of its inhabitants. The crime is seemingly simple, but unraveling it requires working through the labyrinthine ties of family. At the end we feel as though we have read not simply a highly entertaining work of

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²I have some caveats here: the voice or point of view, sometimes, I feel, switches gender. Through Mackay’s eyes we get a very credible male voice, save when he discusses his mother; at this point I feel the point of view is female, as at a few other points in the mss, though this a minor inconsistency.

²A clear distinction, for example, between snogging, and shagging proved to be important in understanding the murder scene. Snogging is the American equivalent of “making-out”, while shagging is pretty much the same in Ireland as in America. Either, it appears, is much more fraught with consequences in Ireland, particularly in a Catholic neighborhood, than in America.
fiction, but a tour de force exploration of the human condition, at least the Dublin humans' condition.

But now we come to the Internet. We have no problem dealing with the lack of the Internet at the time of the original crime. The denouement hinges in part on a paper message, which Rose may or may not have intended for McKay. The early setting then gives us not only time for the many consequences of the crime to echo down the decades, but also explains why the two did not simply call each other...at one point it is said the families were in fact too poor to even have a land line.

Nor would the crime have been solved easier with the Internet than was in fact the case. The problem is the intervening of 22 years. Mackay sincerely believed that Rose was alive, so sincerely that his love for her interferes with his later marriage and other relationships. His wife leaves him, and later attributes this to his ongoing love for Rose, with whom she could not hope to compete. We know that he prowls police databases periodically looking for some evidence of either her death or her life.

It requires a considerable suspension of disbelief, however, to imagine that for 22 years Rose had escaped being somehow referenced on the Internet. This is particularly true because it had been her intention when she planned to run away to make a career in the music business in London. The only possible reason for her complete disappearance simply had to be that she was dead. Once that realization occurred, a simple search of the area she had last planned to be would have turned up her body quite easily as another clue was found pointing to her probable death.

This painstaking—even nitpicking---analysis on my part however, may tell us about the impact of the Internet, but it in no way diminishes our enjoyment of Tana French's *Faithful Place*. It is a very worthy work and Ms. French is a wonderful writer. This was the first of her works I have read and I intend to ultimately read all of them.

Now we come to Laura Lippman’s *I'd Know You Anywhere*. Lippman, like Coben and French, is a multiple Edgar winner and the author of at least 19 works. *I'd Know You Anywhere* displays a very accomplished and experienced writer at the top of her game. It also shows a marvelous use of the Internet.

The protagonist, Eliza Benedict, had been kidnapped and held for six weeks in 1985 by a serial killer, Walter Bowman, and was the only surviving victim of his spree. Now, in the apparent present, he contacts her from his cell on death row. He has seen a contemporary picture of her in a magazine to which he has access, and tracked her down. Given our limited purposes in this review, it is possible to
avoid revealing too much about his motives, but they are one of the issues upon which the plot hinges.

The author uses Internet searches by the protagonist to unfold the back-story, which we do not believe we have seen before. By searching her maiden name, she turns up the past details of her life, and the reader is quickly brought up to speed on the earlier relationship between her and Bowen. This is necessary because she herself has little or no memory of the earlier trauma. This is a very clever device, which facilitates a plot that can take radical twists and turns without the reader at any point calling foul. We know what the Internet knows, and do not know what the Eliza no longer knows.

Eliza is a very competent computer user. Her use of the Internet is consistent through the book without being spectacular. She is not a highly wired heroine who can find information the rest of us could not. For example, she has a very troubled 13 year-old, Isobel (Iso), whom she has begun to suspect needs greater surveillance than she has hitherto been given, particularly when a serial killer of young women has suddenly reentered the family’s lives:

Eliza had installed spyware on the computer and monitored Iso’s IM sessions, which appeared benign enough. Now Iso was pushing for her own phone, but Eliza wasn’t sure if she could track text messages. She would have to seek the advice of other mothers—assuming she eventually made friends with any.  

The author is very conscious of differing periods of Internet use and repeatedly plays successfully upon changes between periods. Early in the period following her kidnapping a not very talented writer had written a true-crime expose sort of book in which he had speculated that she had been not a victim but the female member of a spree-killing team, perhaps even the initiator of the crime for which Bowen was convicted. She once had hoped that her story would die down and she could live a normal life. Her husband tells her, however:

But his book is out there. Nothing really disappears anymore. Once, that kind of true-crime crap would be gone forever, gathering dust in a handful of secondhand bookstores, pulped by the publishers. Now, with online bookstores and eBay and POD technology, it’s a computer click away for anyone who remembers your original name. For all you know, he’s uploaded it to Kindle, sells it for ninety-nine cents a pop.  

The Internet, in Lippman’s work, is very much a part of the environment. When we might turn to it, so does the protagonist. Neither the central mystery nor its

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10 I’d Know You Anywhere: A Novel (Laura Lippman)- Highlight Loc. 209-11
11 I’d Know You Anywhere: A Novel (Laura Lippman)- Highlight Loc. 501-4
unraveling depends in any terribly critical way on the Internet. We are not left with any questions as to why the protagonist had missed easily retrievable information.

If we were to give a “Berglund Best Use of the Internet in Mystery Fiction” to any of the Edgar nominees for 2011, it would go to Harlan Coben first, and secondly, to Laura Lippman. If I were to guess at the eventual winner of the Best Book award, however, I would pick Tana French’s *Faithful Place*. It is a very successful traditional sort of mystery set in such an unusual place among fascinating characters, and so well-written that it will be difficult to ignore, I believe.

**Conclusion**

So what have we learned about the impact of the Internet in this series using high-quality mystery novels as our research materials? First, our belief that the Internet cannot be ignored is born out by our survey. When we are looking for it, at least, its absence can be painfully obvious, and may reveal weaknesses or contrivances in plotting. Even an excellent work, like French’s *Faithful Place* can be seen to have a weakness at its heart.

Authors have developed several recognizable tropes to work around the damage which ignoring the Internet might do to their plots. One is what we are now calling the “Trope of the Backward South,” in which novels can be set in isolated backwoods areas which somewhat alleviate the expectation of a darned good Google search casting light upon plot issues. When we are careening up and down gravel roads looking out for racist rednecks, somehow our expectations are lowered, along with our critical faculties, as in last year’s nominee, John Hart’s work, *The Last Child*, and this year’s nominee, Tom Franklin’s *Crooked Letter*.

Another trope is a very old one, familiar to even ancient Greek theater audiences, the “Deus Ex Machina” in which a god, in this case, the Internet, unexpectedly intervenes at key moments to solve critical questions and carry the plot forward while being mysteriously absent at others. This was the case in last year’s nominee, *Blue Heaven*, by C.J. Box. Box also threw in a variant on the “Trope of the Backward South,” which we might call the “Trope of the Noble West,” in which the enemy is modernity, which threatens to corrupt a western community and its cowboy detective. In this case, the detective’s computer-enabled sidekick cannot get internet-derived critical information to him because of a lack of good phone service. When service is available, the god magically descends.

In this year’s nominee, *The Queen of Patpong* by Timothy Hallinan, there is a similar working of the two tropes. Because we don’t know exactly how Internet savvy Thai hookers are, we suspend disbelief a la the Backward South. And a
handy but reluctant intelligence agent periodically descends into the plot with necessary information to unravel it.

None of these, of course, are bad books. Not only are they all engrossing reads, but also they are well plotted by all conventional standards, and they have, after all, each been nominated for the highest award in mystery or detective fiction.

It is possible, however, to write an excellent mystery novel while making good or appropriate use of the Internet. Both Harlan Coben’s *Caught*, and Laura Lippman’s *I’d Know You Anywhere* do so. In this survey, the success at using the Internet ranges from rather contrived attempts to avoid doing so by use of the tropes discussed above, to the spectacularly successful use by Harlan Coben and the very naturalistic and utilitarian use by Laura Lippman. Perhaps this ultimately shows that the impact of the Internet is progressing in mystery fiction as in most other aspects of modern life, but also that it threatens some of our old practices.