



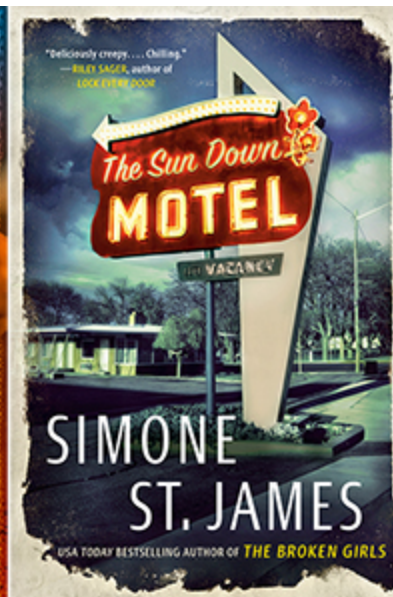
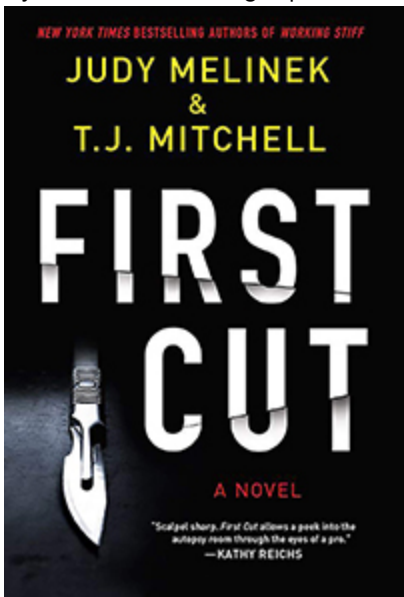
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Out of the Shadows: New Mysteries & Thrillers 2019–2020

By Michael J. Seidlinger | Nov 15, 2019



It's been seven years since Gillian Flynn introduced readers to Nick and Amy Dunne and the dark deceptions beneath the facade of their seemingly perfect

marriage. *Gone Girl* has since sold 3.8 million print copies, per NPD BookScan; spawned a critically and commercially successful film adaptation; and kicked off a seemingly endless procession of domestic thrillers and dodgy narrators.

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“A lot of people jumped on the psychological suspense bandwagon,” says Jennifer Brehl, executive editor at William Morrow. Notable examples include 2015’s *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins, 2016’s *All the Missing Girls* by Megan Miranda, and 2018’s *The Woman in the Window* by A.J. Finn.

Thanks to an ongoing sameness in submissions, editors say, the competition to stand out has become increasingly fierce. “I feel like I’m under an enormous amount of pressure,” says Sarah Goodman, editorial director at St. Martin’s. “Now more than ever, you need to have a book that pulls you in completely.”

For some authors, that means bucking the psychological suspense trend and exploring other corners of the genre. Here, we look at some of the coming season's paranormal, medical, and technological thrills.

Unequal Ground

Forthcoming supernatural thrillers address real-world concerns, such as economic inequality and climate change, from behind the guise of the weird.

"We're starting to realize that Mother Nature herself is not a reliable narrator," says Emily Bestler, editor-in-chief of her eponymous imprint at Atria. In February's *The Chill* by Scott Carson (the pen name of "a *New York Times*–bestselling author and screenwriter," according to the publisher), ecological concerns collide with the otherworldly. The creation of a reservoir a century ago brought water to millions of people in New York

City but drowned an upstate village in the process; in the present, an inspector overseeing the dam discovers a deadly prophecy that local townspeople left behind as revenge for the environmental injustice they suffered.

"Supernatural and horror stories often coincide with paranoia and political unrest," Carson says. "There's some comfort in reading about a supernatural threat in a period when you're bombarded all day long by realistic threats."

Daphne Durham, executive editor at MCD Books, sees a similar connection between contemporary reality and an appetite for the unearthly. "I feel like people need something clearly more horrifying than our current political situation," she says. Reading a supernatural thriller, she says, "is like sinking into a fable."

The author of *The Boatman's Daughter* (MCD and FSG Originals, Feb. 2020), Andy Davidson, made what *PW*'s starred review called a "bold, confident debut" with 2017's *In the Valley of the Sun* (Skyhorse), "a complex novel of horror, human nature, and the American South." In Davidson's new novel, Miranda Crabtree, whose father was killed when she was a child, scrapes by as a drug smuggler for an unhinged preacher while protecting her makeshift family, which includes a semi-magical boy. She discovers dark forces in the bayou that threaten her already uncertain existence.

"People are interested in narratives that reach beyond reality but also reflect aspects of reality at the same time," Davidson says. "Horror is simultaneous escapism and catharsis."

For *The Sun Down Motel* (Berkley, Feb. 2020), Simone St. James, who set 2016's *The Broken Girls* at an abandoned boarding school, centers the action on a seedy motel in a decaying Upstate New York town. "The motel is almost alive and it's almost its own character," says Danielle Perez, executive editor at Berkley Publishing Group. Carly Kirk arrives at the lodging from her Illinois hometown and takes a job on the graveyard shift in the hope of discovering what happened to her aunt, who disappeared while working as a night clerk at the motel 35 years earlier.

"Our social predicaments are becoming palpable supervillains," St. James says. *PW*'s review called the novel "engrossing," with a "shocking, satisfying denouement."

Technology Stares Back

Artificial intelligence is everywhere—in finance, in social media, and even, with the recent introduction of a \$220 AI-equipped electric toothbrush, on drugstore shelves. Several authors are tapping into anxiety around increasingly invasive AI, all-consuming video games, and other technological threats.

Matt Ruff has addressed contemporary concerns through a fantastical lens before, most recently in 2016's *Lovecraft Country*, which *PW* called a "timely rumination on racism in America." Now, in *88 Names* (Harper, Mar. 2020), he turns his attention to VR gaming with a side of politics. His protagonist, John Chu, works as a digital

sherpa, leading clients not through the Himalayas but through an online role-playing game. He lands a dream assignment, a wealthy player named Mr. Jones, but as the tour begins, he starts to wonder if Mr. Jones is really North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. (For *PW's* q&a with Ruff, see “The Great Pretenders.”)

In May, Berkley will release Silicon Valley biochemist Carole Stivers's debut, *The Mother Code*, set in a near future ravaged by biowarfare. In an effort to save humanity from extinction, genetically engineered children are placed inside robot incubators, which function as parents for an entire generation. Once the children come of age, government officials decide the robots have outlived their usefulness.

“There's a fear of AI—that it's going to take over, take your job,” Stivers says. “People are obsessed with monsters, and AI is another form of them, a perfect shell for our fears.” Her robots, though, serve another narrative purpose. “I didn't want to put villains in the book,” she says. “I wanted to provide a take on life after death, prolonging someone's life in the form of an AI.” Steven Spielberg, who directed 2001's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, has optioned the novel for film.

Artificial intelligence and family are also at the center of *The God Game* by Danny Tobey (St. Martin's, Jan. 2020), in which a group of high school students becomes entangled in a video game controlled by an AI that believes it's a deity. As the game progresses, harmless-seeming missions morph into cruel pranks with real-world consequences. “The heartlessness on display may put off some readers, but fans of AI run amok should relish this one,” *PW's* review said.

As the AI ratchets up its demands, the teens discover secrets about their parents that upset their formerly placid suburban lives. “Parents and children are at the heart of the book,” Tobey says. “It's about how tech divides families and how people need to fight to bring themselves back together.”

Crash (Forge, May 2020) by financial journalist Lawrence Light and techno-thriller writer David Hagberg, who died in September, hinges on the world's technological vulnerability and economic precarity. “Now's the time for the reascent of the big tech thriller,” Light says. “Policy makers resemble ostriches in their willful obliviousness to our massive debt. It's important to explain it in a reader-friendly way—how people who inhabit the money arena have such a big effect on regular people's lives.” The novel unfolds over the course of a brisk 36 hours, when an international conspiracy seeks to hasten a second Great Depression by, in part, hacking into and shutting down the East Coast's electrical grid.

“People have been thinking for years how there are larger forces beyond their control that make bad things happen,” Light says. “It's true, and it's deep in our politics.”

Body Count

Robin Cook, who trained as a surgeon and ophthalmologist and served as a Navy submarine medical officer, is often credited with creating the medical thriller genre with 1977's *Coma*. As medical technology continues to develop, he and other novelists gain new stories to tell. “I try to anticipate trends, specifically in biotechnology,” he says. “Genetic genealogy is really exploding. The Golden State Killer was caught using the technology.”

In *Genesis* (Putnam, Dec.), Cook's latest thriller featuring chief New York City medical examiner Laurie Montgomery, the veteran pathologist's lab receives the body of a 28-year-old social worker whose death at first appears to be the result of a drug overdose. Montgomery soon realizes that things don't quite add up, and when a medical emergency prevents her from pursuing the case any further, her assistant uses DNA databases to search for a suspect in what may have been a murder.

“It almost feels futuristic, what our technology is now capable of doing,” says Putnam executive editor Margo Lipschultz. “In Robin's latest, he's showing that the future is now.”

Other authors, too, draw on their medical experience in forthcoming fiction. Ross Pennie, a Canadian infectious disease specialist, has published four books starring Zol Szabo, a public health doctor and medical detective; *PW's* starred review of the most recent installment, 2017's *Beneath the Wake*, said Pennie's expertise "clearly informs and adds a complex realism to this excellent page-turner." In Szabo's next outing, *Bitter Paradise* (ECW, May 2020), he and his colleague Natasha Sharma combat an outbreak of vaccine-resistant polio. At the same time, Hosam Khousa, a physician newly arrived in Ontario after fleeing persecution and torture in his native Syria, has found work as a barber in order to support his family and remain out of the spotlight. A fellow Syrian is killed in his barbershop, setting off a chain of events that leads Khousa to Szabo and Sharma's investigation.

Though the medical mystery is a main driver of the plot, says Jack David, copublisher and editor at ECW Press, highlighting the struggles of Syrian refugees in Canada was equally important to Pennie. "We're asking human questions and looking for answers in a world that is increasingly less human," David says.

Forensic pathologist Judy Melinek and her husband, T.J. Mitchell, make their fiction debut with *First Cut* (Hanover Square, Jan. 2020). *PW's* review called their previous book, the memoir *Working Stiff: Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner*, "inspiring and engaging." *First Cut* introduces medical examiner Jessie Teska, newly arrived in San Francisco with a caseload that includes a suspected heroin overdose. Teska sees signs of homicide and, amid resistance from colleagues and her boss, works to uncover a plot involving a powerful drug lord and San Francisco's tech-startup culture.

"While Jessie's gutsy personality will endear her to readers, it's the meticulous detail that distinguishes this novel," *PW's* review said. "The authors nail the (oftentimes ghastly) mundanities of life as a medical examiner."

Melinek and Mitchell, like other thriller writers *PW* spoke with, sought to ground their fictional plot in emotional truth and hard facts. "We wanted to create something closer to the reality of forensic pathology," Melinek says. "We don't always figure it out right away; sometimes we don't figure it out at all."

Below, more on the subject of mysteries and thrillers.

The Great Pretenders: *PW* talks with Matt Ruff

Mysterious Strangers: New Mysteries & Thrillers 2019–2020

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A version of this article appeared in the 11/18/2019 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: Out of the Shadows