Killer Year

Edited by Lee Child

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Introduction
by Lee Child

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I won't tell you how old I am, but I'll give you a clue: the first record I bought was "She Loves You" by the Beatles. Back then I lived in England, and 45 rpm singles cost six shillings and eight pence, exactly one-third of a British pound, which was a substantial but feasible sum for a boy in my position. LP records were a different story. There was something called retail price maintenance—essential government support, or evil price-fixing, depending on your political persuasion—that made an LP's price exactly thirty-two shillings and fivepence ha'penny. Way, way more than I could afford. I could have mowed my whole neighborhood—if it had had any grass—and still come up short. LP records were strictly for birthdays and Christmas, two a year. But I loved them. The smell, the feel, the sleeves, the shiny vinyl, the tiny shimmering grooves. And the music.

Then, late in the sixties, a couple of record companies came out with samplers, both loosely from the world of progressive rock. Full-size LPs, proper sleeves, the smell, the feel, the grooves . . . twelve tracks, maybe two from bands I had heard of, plus ten others I had never heard of. All at the amazing price of seven shillings and sixpence! Just ten pence more than a single! I was all over them, naturally. And they were wonderful. I was introduced to many, many bands that I love to this day.

That's what you've got in your hands right now.

A sampler.

We've included three writers you might already know, and thirteen more you'll soon come to know. A total of sixteen stories, with introductions to the new writers from veterans with about a thousand years in the business between them. How's that for value?

The three familiar names are Allison Brennan, Ken Bruen, and Duane Swierczynski. Allison is the new poster girl for success, proving yet again that talent is always enough. Ken is a cult fixture, and has been for years—and will be for years more: to look at him, you might think he'll keel over any minute, but when you know him, you realize he'll outlast everybody . . . well, maybe not Keith Richards, but it'll be close. Duane is in the early stages of what will be a stellar career. Some people just have what it takes, and Duane has more than his share.

The new guys—in order of appearance—are Brett Battles, Robert Gregory Browne, Bill Cameron, Toni McGee Causey, Sean Chercover, J. T. Ellison, Patry Francis, Marc Lecard, Derek Nikitas, Gregg Olsen, Jason Pinter, Marcus Sakey, and Dave White. I've gotten to know most of them quite well. They're quality people, and quality writers. But they're more than just thirteen nice guys and thirteen new names. They're a . . . what? A cooperative, a group, a band of ruffians, smart enough to join forces in an organization they called Killer Year. The idea was to make some noise and generate some buzz. And it worked. (Why else would all those veteran bestsellers write their introductions? Not because they were getting paid, I assure you.) My friend M. J. Rose has contributed an essay to this book that explains the context better than I can. And my friend Laura Lippman has written a coda to sum the whole thing up.

Which leaves me to say just once more: this is a sampler. I think you'll enjoy these stories—they're all excellent, and some of them are just plain great. If you agree, bear this in mind: short stories are far, far harder to write than novels. So if you like these guys' stories, check out their novels—I promise you, they'll be to die for.

The Class of Co-opetition
by M. J. Rose

•

The point of this collection of stories is to thrill you, the reader. And no one expects you to care that the publishing biz is in dire straits. But to appreciate the spirit in which this collection of stories came together, it helps to understand something about the publishing industry at this point in time.

With margins low, distribution costs rocketing, limited or no marketing budgets for all but the top 15 percent of titles, and little major media interest in all but the biggest authors, book sales drop a little more every year and fewer and fewer authors can live off their fiction efforts.

Ours has become a risk-averse industry that more and more puts all its eggs in the same baskets year in, year out: a few brand-name authors, yet there are more than one thousand novels traditionally published every month.

These days even some of the biggest and the best authors will attest that their job is as much about selling as it is writing, because the support they get from their publishers is no longer enough to spread the word among booksellers, let alone readers. Authors hiring outside publicists and webmasters, buying additional advertising, subsidizing book tours, not just talking about marketing but doing something about it . . . all these things are no longer the exception but the rule.

You might think, because of all this, that there's an every-man-for-himself attitude among writers, each one trying to outfox the other for limited ad dollars, blog reviews, special events or promotions. Yet one group of writers who routinely practice backstabbing, larceny, and murder is doing the opposite: working together to promote each other's books.

In the fall of 2004, International Thriller Writers—ITW for short—was created at a mystery and suspense book conference called Bouchercon. Our goal was to celebrate the thriller, enhance the prestige and raise the profile of thrillers, create a community that together could do more, much more, than any one author—or even any one publisher—could for the genre.

Now ITW, with more than five hundred members who have more than two billion books in print, is changing the rules for how books are sold and marketed, and how writers work together.

Superstars have rolled up their sleeves to work alongside mid-list and debut novelists to apply some fresh thinking to a stale industry.

And nowhere is that spirit of co-opetition more evident than in this book. The authors of this collection are in essence in competition with each other; if you look at the statistics, the average "avid" reader only buys 2.5 books a year.

And yet this smart, savvy group of debut authors came up with a plan to give fresh verve and energy to the clichéd phrase "strength in numbers." They've turned it into "creativity in numbers."

To support these debut authors, ITW offered to mentor the Class of '07 because we recognized our same spirit in them: a group of writers willing to band together and help each other rather than view each other as competition. To do something different. And to do it right.

We wanted to help, not just because we were so damned impressed with the creativity of the idea but because once upon a time—be it twenty-five years ago or last year—each and every one of ITW's members was a debut novelist.

And most of us remember every single difficult step of that process.

For some of us that means remembering the people who helped us.

Or that there was no one to help us.

And how isolating that was.

Wouldn't it be great if ITW as an organization could help the debut authors who are going to be the future of our genre?

So over the summer of 2006, the full ITW board of directors approved the idea to adopt Killer Year 2007 and take some of the tough work out of being a debut novelist by helping each author through their baptism by fire into the publishing world.

Lee Child, Jeff Deaver, Tess Gerritsen, Gayle Lynds, David Morrell, Jim Rollins, Anne Frasier, Douglas Clegg, Duane Swierczynski, Cornelia Read, Harley Jane Kozak, Allison Brennan, Ken Bruen, and Joe R. Lansdale all signed on to be mentors.

This idea of cooperation among potential rivals is a variation on a theme we're beginning to see in other places on the Web, from group blogs to social networking sites like MySpace or cultural hotspots like YouTube.

For an industry losing readers to video games, movies, digital cable, blogs, and a creeping apathy about books, it seems a no-brainer.

But, as ITW member and author Tim Maleeny said about the program, "It's no small irony that it took a bunch of writers who probe the darkest side of humanity to see the light."

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