

~~him to Michael Connelly because of Connelly's near iconic status (I consider him to be the world's best living crime writer), but there are some similarities that immediately become evident. So, if you are a Michael Connelly fan, please give Bruce Robert Coffin a try. It's next to impossible to be as good as Connelly, but being nearly as good is high praise in my book. I would give the four books in the series a rating of A to A-. Enjoy.~~

## M.W (Mike) Craven



Mike Craven

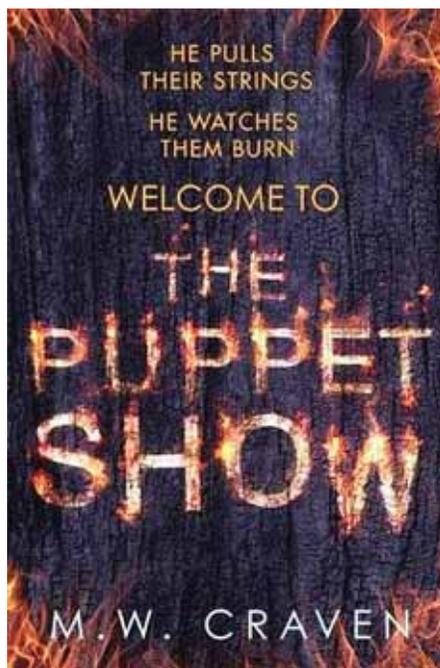
M. W. (Mike) Craven is a British writer whom I have not yet met, but we have corresponded. I have to admit that I probably wouldn't have read his novels if not for two factors: 1. His third novel (and first in the Washington Poe series) **THE PUPPET SHOW** won the 2019 CWA Gold Dagger Award for Best Crime Novel in the U.K. That made me sit up and take notice; and 2. Through my good friend Mystery Mike Bur-saw, I was able to get a very reasonably priced limited edition of **THE PUPPET SHOW**. Upon opening the book, I found myself hooked after just a few pages. I then devoured it and couldn't wait to get a copy of the second in the series, **BLACK SUMMER**. When it arrived, I read it in two days. The third in the series, **THE CURATOR**, is due out in June, 2020 and the author kindly sent me an advanced reading copy – which I likewise devoured in two days.

Unfortunately, these novels haven't been published in the U.S. yet (which I find puzzling because I consider this to be a very high quality series), but rea-

sonably priced editions are available on the internet. I see that Amazon offers a kindle edition of **THE PUPPET SHOW** for just \$3.99, which is a real steal!

Mike Craven was born in Cumbria where he sets his Washington Poe series. At age sixteen, he joined the army and served for many years. In 1999 Mike was hired by the Cumbria Probation service and eventually worked his way up to chief officer grade. His experience in law enforcement provided him with a rich trove of expertise to draw on for his novel writing, which occurred when he retired from the probation service. His first two novels (in the DI Avison Fluke series) are **BORN IN A BURIAL GOWN** (2015) and **BODY BREAKER** (2017). Mike and his wife Joanne live in Carlisle with their springer spaniel.

When I read a plot summary of **THE PUPPET SHOW** (Constable, £19.99, June, 2018) some time ago I was put off by the description of a serial killer who burned his victims. It just seemed too creepy for my tastes. Then it won the CWA Gold Dagger, which is quite a feat in and of itself, but for a relatively obscure newcomer (he had written two crime novels previously) to do so really caught my attention. A first edition of the novel practically fell into my lap so I decided to give it a try. Twenty pages in I was hooked and read the entire book (342 pages) in two days – and I abso-



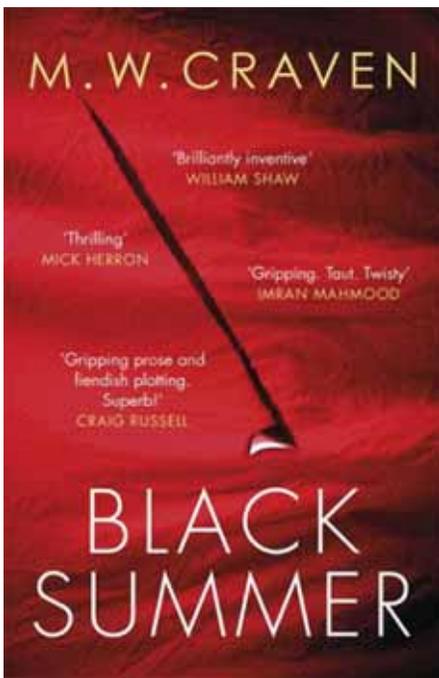
lutely loved it. It was not creepy, nor did it have much in the way of graphic violence. Almost everything that might be distasteful takes place off stage. It is dark and there are some bad things that happen to innocents and good people, but it's crime fiction, folks. You've got to expect that – unless it's a cozy mystery set in a bake shop.

Brilliant, disgraced and suspended detective Washington Poe is enjoying his time off and fixing up his little croft on the Cumbrian moors. But his bosses come looking for him when faced with a very puzzling case of a serial murderer who is leaving immolated bodies in some of Cumbria's famous stone circles. It turns out that the latest victim has "Washington Poe" carved on his chest, with a number "5" carved there as well. Is Poe going to be victim #5?

So back to work he goes at the National Crime Agency (England's equivalent of the FBI), but he is no longer a DI, but a demoted DS and working under his former underling who has been promoted over him – DI Stephanie Flynn. Also helping out is a new crime analyst, Tilly Bradshaw, who has an off-the-charts IQ, but is socially quite awkward. She is naive, innocent, having been sheltered from the world, takes everything literally, has problems adapting to situations and is targeted by bullies. But Poe takes her under his wing and together they make a formidable team. Interaction between the two gives the author an opportunity to introduce some levity into the narrative.

The writing is silky smooth and the plotting ingenious. But it is the characters that leap off the page and engage the reader. Especially Poe and Tilly. I wish I had read this a couple of years ago so as to give it some Barry Award consideration, but if it finds an American publisher it will be eligible in the year it is published here.

**BLACK SUMMER** (Constable, £19.99, June, 2019) treats a subject that all good detectives hate – the possibility that they made a mistake and put an innocent man in prison. Years earlier, DI Poe arrested and incarcerated celebrity chef Jared Keaton following the brutal murder of his daughter Elizabeth. But



Elizabeth's body was never found – just large quantities of her blood. With Keaton serving a life sentence, it is perplexing when a distraught young woman appears to the authorities claiming to be Elizabeth Keaton. Then she disappears, but not before, giving DNA samples which correspond to the DNA of Elizabeth Keaton saved six years before.

DS Poe (since demoted in favor of close colleague DI Stephanie Flynn) simply can't believe it. He knows in the core of his being that Jared Keaton is a psychopathic killer and he sets out to prove it – despite seemingly incontrovertible DNA evidence.

Detective Superintendent Gamble, who was in charge at the time of Jared Keaton's apprehension is now suspended, and his replacement is looking askance at Poe. When the alleged Elizabeth Keaton, vanishes once more, Poe has his back to the wall as some in the police suspect him of killing her to cover up his alleged incompetence. Thankfully he has the resources and technical skills of the socially awkward analyst 'Tilly' Bradshaw at hand.

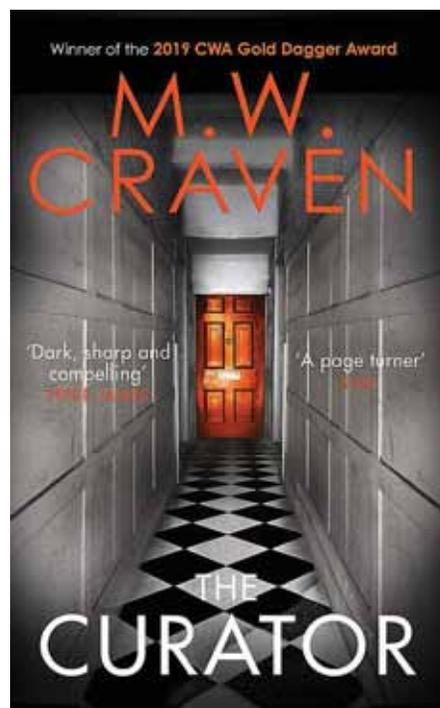
There are echoes of Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme and Amelia Sachs, in the pairing of Washington Poe and Matilda Bradshaw, though Craven's style is his own, and the characters' personalities are quite different. The narrative is

slippery, with short chapters as Detective and Analyst work at the conundrum that is the Keaton family.

This sophomore work further builds upon Craven's skills as a storyteller, one with a dark imagination and a sharp insight into the mind of a psychopath. Thankfully there is gentle humour to add light relief to the darkness, as there are some disturbing episodes that could possibly haunt.

**BLACK SUMMER** is a welcome addition to British crime fiction and should more than satisfy fans of police procedurals, great detectives and the psychological mind-games played-out between those who defend the law, and those who seek to harm others in gruesome ways.

**THE CURATOR** (Constable, £16.99, June, 2020). The three-person team of DI Stephanie Flynn, DS Washington Poe and analyst Matilda "Tilly" Bradshaw have been handed another puzzling case. Flynn is in the last stages of pregnancy and is as bristly as a cornered porcupine (which Poe finds hilarious, but keeps to himself). Poe is on the verge of being evicted from his beloved, rough-hewn croft and Tilly is ... well, Tilly. All of that is put aside as they dig into a real conundrum of an investigation.



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**Please take a  
 moment to vote  
 for the  
 Barry Awards  
 NOW  
 (page 39)**

It is Christmas time and severed fingers are being left in various locations in Cumbria, England. A puzzling "#BSC6" message is left with the fingers and no one can decipher its meaning. They belong to three people, but only one body is found.

When a disgraced FBI agent contacts Poe with information helpful to the investigation, things start making more sense, but just barely.

Poe is eventually led to a very remote island only accessible for a short period per day and a disfigured man in a wheelchair who may be the key to everything. A very surprising, dangerous and exciting conclusion ensues.

While this may seem like a police procedural, I consider **THE CURATOR** a "great detective" type of crime novel. The brilliance and unpredictability of Poe and Tilly propel the story line to a satisfying finale. The mixture of very serious murders is often juxtaposed with humorous interludes. I especially enjoyed the early chapter of Poe attending a baby shower with fifty women.

I would give the three books in the series a rating of A to A-. You have some great reading in store.

Over time, authors come and go on my "must read" list of favorites. Bruce Robert Coffin and Mike Craven have permanent status on that list now and I look forward with great anticipation to their future work.