

Review



Picture: Getty Images

HERRON RULES

The new spy novel from Mick Herron confirms his fast-growing reputation as a must-read author, writes **Michele Magwood**

One of the authors I'm most looking forward to meeting at the Franschhoek Literary Festival next week is Mick Herron. The British writer has been quietly turning out a series of spy novels that have built something of a cult following. With *London Rules*, his fifth, it looks like he's reached the tipping point onto the mainstream radar.

The plain cover of the book obscures a rare combination of wit, plot, affecting writing and vivid characterisation. It is savagely funny but serious, cynical and sanguine and whipingly plotted, veering from small human vignettes to huge public events.

Jackson Lamb is the axis of the series, a great greedy gaseous lunk who lives on Chinese takeaways and tumbler of Scotch. He's a washed up Cold War operative who has been shut out of MI5 and put in charge of a band of disgraced spies, the so-called "slow horses". They are stabled in a decaying building called Slough House where they eke out their days sifting through statistics and drinking weak tea. There's Catherine Standish, a recovering alcoholic, who Lamb teases by pouring her drinks; River Cartwright, scion of a legendary MI5 family who screwed up spectacularly; Shirley Dander is a cokehead with anger problems; Louisa Guy is paralysed by grief for her dead



London Rules ★★★★★
Mick Herron, John Murray, R295

partner; and JK Coe is a psychologist with post-traumatic stress disorder, who hides under a hoodie with buds in his ears. And then there is the deliciously awful Roddy Ho, genius hacker and delusional narcissist.

When a terrorist cell erupts into a string of attacks, evidence points to Ho having unwittingly passed information to his girlfriend. And so the slow horses are dragged reluctantly into the action, because the first of the *London Rules*, as everybody knows, is *Cover Your Arse*.

Herron presents a sharply contemporary view of the UK that at times borders on libel: the populist Brexiteer politician (and secret cross-dresser) Dennis Gimmel and his harpy columnist wife, Dodie; the Muslim politician Zafar Jaffrey, in the running to be mayor of the West Midlands, who has some worrying cohorts, and a vain and weak prime minister concerned only with his image.

As the terrorists strike again and again, the

intelligence services get help – almost by accident – from the farcically inept Slough Housers.

Their bickering is blistering but it's Lamb who gets the best lines. He asks Louisa for an educated guess; when she replies he barks, "I said educated. That guess left school at 15 for a job at Asda."

Lamb turns to Coe: "You're the one who gets panic attacks, right? Behind you! Just kidding." He compares ethical behaviour to "a vajazzle on a nun. Pretty to picture, but who really benefits?"

Padding through the action, and lifting the book to another plane is some arresting description of the hours of the day passing.

"In some parts of the world dawn arrives with rosy fingers, to smooth away the creases left by night. But on Aldersgate Street . . . it comes wearing safe-cracker's gloves, so as not to leave prints on windowsills and doorknobs; it squints through keyholes, sizes up locks, and generally cases the joint ahead of approaching day."

Herron has, of course, been compared to John le Carré and Graham Greene but he is entirely, subversively, unique. **📧**

@michelemagwood

Mick Herron will be at the Franschhoek Literary Festival May 18–20 and at Exclusive Books, Hyde Park on May 22.

NOT THE CRIME THRILLER YOU EXPECTED FROM THIS JAPANESE WRITER

Seventeen ★★★★★
Hideo Yokoyama, Quercus, R295

The tension in *Seventeen* is immediate. The scene is set for what prepares you for a tale that reads like a walk on a tightrope. The novel opens on Mount Tanigawa and cites the hundreds of men who lost their lives attempting to climb it. And then the reader is jettisoned into the newsroom of The North Kanto Times (NKT), which is lively yet fraught with office politics and soon-to-be revealed history of the paper and its staff.

It is 1985, the year of a massive air disaster that leaves 520 dead and the NKT with an unimaginable scoop.

The story is told through the eyes of seasoned reporter Kazumasa Yuuki who, 17 years later, not only revisits the events that took place in the week of the catastrophe, but also his own promise to climb the Tsuitate rockface of Mount Tanigawa.

The author, Japanese mystery novelist Hideo Yokoyama was a well-known former journalist, who worked for the Jomo Shimun, a regional daily newspaper



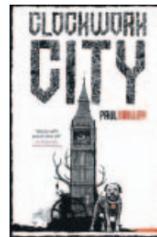
published in Gunma Prefecture, Japan. So he's perfectly placed to paint a picture and evoke the mood of a newsroom – which he does beautifully.

Yokoyama also penned the 2016 thrilling crime-fiction novel *Six Four*, which became a publishing phenomenon after selling a million copies in six days. But readers should not expect the same of *Seventeen*, which is not so much a thriller or an investigative mystery as it is a detailed, factual narrative that unfolds painstakingly. **📧**

Zodwa Kumalo @Zoddies

Book Bites

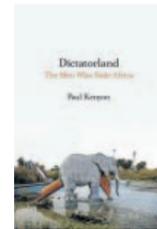
Clockwork City ★★★★★
Paul Crilley, Hodder & Stoughton, R315



This is Scottish writer Crilley's latest engrossing supernatural-procedural. The story that started in his debut *Poison City* continues as low-grade magician Gideon Tau (aka London)

and his demonic sidekick dog (aka Dog) are once again tasked to save the world. Haunted by the kidnapping of his daughter, London can't stop tugging at the threads of her disappearance. His investigation takes him and Dog from Durban to London and into the magical world of Faerie. The colourful cast of characters includes Armitage the chocoholic revenant, and alcoholic Fae-enthusiast Callum Winters. Then there's also Mother London, Queen Rat and a cast of bad guys wanting to eat them. *Clockwork City* is hilarious, terrifying and wonderfully imaginative. **📧** Anna Stroud @annawriter_

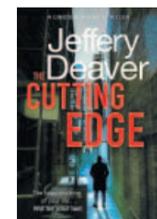
Dictatorland: The Men Who Stole Africa ★★★★★
Paul Kenyon, Head of Zeus, R315



The plunder of Africa by a handful of elite leaders has seen the continent stripped of its beauty and we are rapidly losing what is left of its natural resources to the corrupt. This is the

story of the men who stole Africa. The dictators who have cut their land and people off from the world, forcing them into poverty, and yet they live fine lives many only dream of. Paul Kenyon has a beautiful way with words and this book will leave you haunted. How is it possible that this magnificent land of ours has been lost? More importantly, is there any hope? **📧** Jessica Levitt @jesslevitt

Jeffery Deaver ★★★★★
The Cutting Edge, Hodder & Stoughton, R295



My relationship with Lincoln Rhymes and Amelia Sachs is complicated. I still love them as a power couple investigating convoluted murder cases but I feel that most of the magic

and chemistry is gone. It's time to move on. Deaver still manages to deliver the expected quantum of thrills and twists and turnabouts but it's all so very meh – although you do learn reams about diamonds. Rhymes and Sachs have to find a killer targeting happily engaged couples – their love is hated by the killer. Or is it? **📧** Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt