



The Best American Mystery Stories 2016

Elizabeth George (Editor) , Otto Penzler (Editor)

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“What you’ll find in this volume are stories that demonstrate a mastery of plotting; stories that compel you to keep turning the pages because of plot and because of setting; stories that wield suspense like a sword; stories of people getting their comeuppance; stories that utilize superb point of view; stories that plumb one particular and unfortunate attribute of a character,” promises guest editor Elizabeth George in her introduction. *The Best American Mystery Stories 2016* is a feast of both literary crime and hard-boiled detection, featuring a seemingly innocent murderer, a drug dealer in love, a drunken prank gone terribly wrong, and plenty of other surprising twists and turns.

The Best American Mystery Stories 2016 includes STEVE ALMOND, MEGAN ABBOTT, MATT BELL, LYDIA FITZPATRICK, TOM FRANKLIN, STEPHEN KING, ELMORE LEONARD, KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH *and others*

ELIZABETH GEORGE, guest editor, is the *New York Times* and internationally best-selling author of twenty British crime novels featuring Detective Inspector Thomas Lynley and his unconventional partner, Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers. Her crime novels have been translated into thirty languages and featured on television by the BBC.

OTTO PENZLER, series editor, is a renowned mystery editor, publisher, columnist, and owner of New York’s The Mysterious Bookshop, the oldest and largest bookstores solely dedicated to mystery fiction. He has edited more than fifty crime-fiction anthologies.

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From Reader Review The Best American Mystery Stories 2016 for online ebook

Joseph says

No truly outstanding stories this year, but several very good ones. I recommend:

- Megan Abbott, "The Little Men"
 - Steve Almond, "Okay, Now Do You Surrender?"
 - Matt Bell, "Toward the Company of Others"
 - Lydia Fitzpatrick, "Safety"
 - Tom Franklin, "Christians"
 - Robert Lopresti, "Street of the Dead House"
 - Michael Noll, "The Tank Yard"
 - Brian Tobin, "Entwined"
-

Susan says

This is always my favorite anthology to read. I love seeing the range of mystery stories, some with surprising twists, some with absolutely gorgeous writing (Tom Franklin) and some that are just terrifying and gave me nightmares. Each one is its own world.

Kristen says

This series is always a mixed bag, and I'm not a huge fan of short stories in general. They just never seem satisfying enough. There were some really good ones in here, though. Highlights:

"The Little Men" by Megan Abbot: This had an early 20th century Hollywood, Mulholland Drive kind of vibe that I really liked.

"Okay, Now Do You Surrender?" by Steve Almond: Laugh-out-loud funny and probably my favorite in the book.

"The Tank Yard" by Michael Noll: A little bit trendy with the meth-cooking storyline, but I thought Noll did an excellent job of creating a unlikable character who could still elicit real feeling.

Cybercrone says

Since George writes good mysteries, I had expected that this book would have stories closer to the average reader's idea of a mystery, but nope, pretty much all of the stories were something else.

Not that they were bad stories, just not what I was wanting and expecting.

Elizabeth says

Outstanding collection that pushes the limits of what we expect from mysteries. "The Little Men" is a zinger!

Jim says

As some have pointed out, these are not what many of us would call mysteries. Some I enjoyed quite a bit, others I struggled to finish. It took a while to finish as other books kept calling to me.

Mitsuru says

This book consists of the skillful writers' stories, so I enjoyed all stories. My favorite stories are "A Death" by Stephen King, "For Something to Do" by Elmore Leonard, "Street of the Dead House" by Robert Lopresti, "Trash" by Todd Robinson, and "Christmas Eve at the Exit" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. I like didactic novels, so my choices may be thoughtless.

PS:

"Fool Proof" by Bruce Robert Coffin has an unexpected development, so I was very attracted, but there is a fuzzy scene about how to sneak into the drum without anyone knowing.

Alice says

I'm a big fan of these collections, and they change slant with each guest editor. Ms. George has chosen some excellent stories, many of them quite dark. Portland's Bruce R. Coffin has a story in here that is terrific.

Stephen Prelewicz says

I read regularly from The Best American series each year (mysteries, essays, fiction, science and technology). The 2016 mysteries is another solid entry. I can't imagine every reader will like every selection, but I found most choices very satisfying

RJ says

The 20th edition of this anthology series includes:

- The Little Men by Megan Abbott - 4/5 - ghost story set in the Golden Age of Hollywood
- Okay, Now Do You Surrender? by Steve Almond - 5/5 - the Manners Mafia is not to be trifled with
- Toward the Company of Others by Matt Bell - 3/5 - mad dog town gonna set you free
- Fool Proof by Bruce Robert Coffin - 4/5 - you see what happens when you find a stranger in the Alps?*

- Safety by Lydia Fitzpatrick - 3/5 - from the perspective of a young boy during a school shooting
- Christians by Tom Franklin - 4/5 - mamas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys
- A Death by Stephen King - 4/5 - I hear the voice of the mystic mountains, callin' me back home
- For Something to Do by Elmore Leonard - 4/5 - the problem with houseguests is they don't always know when it's time to leave
- The Continental Opposite by Evan Lewis - 4/5 - Hammett's famous private eye returns for another case, this one in post-WWII Portland
- Street of the Dead House by Robert Lopresti - 4/5 - revisits Murders in the Rue Morgue from the perspective of the murderer
- Lafferty's Ghost by Dennis McFadden - 4/5 - when marriage counselors go bad
- Tank Yard by Michael Noll - 4/5 - this is your brain on drugs
- Trash by Todd Robinson - 3/5 - one man's trash...
- Christmas Eve at the Exit: A Sweet Young Things Mystery by Kristine Kathryn Rusch - 3/5 - wife and child on the run
- The Mountain Top by Georgia Ruth - 3/5 - post-economic collapse survivalists
- Mailman by Jonathan Stone - 5/5 - adds a new perspective to "appointed rounds"
- Rearview Mirror by Art Taylor - 3/5 - just can't wait to get on the road again
- Border Crossing by Susan Thornton - 3/5 - Incident at Owl Creek Bridge revisited, with human trafficking victims
- Entwined by Brian Tobin - 4/5 - just an accidental death, until the layers are peeled back
- God's Plan for Dr. Gaynor and Hastings Chiume by Saral Waldorf - 3/5 - murder in Nambia

* Google it

Brad Hodges says

The 2016 edition of *The Best American Mystery Stories* is a fairly good collection, with some big names, but once again there is the ongoing debate with what a mystery story actually is. Series editor Otto Penzler writes: "While I love good puzzles and tales of pure ratiocination, few of these are written today, as the mystery genre has evolved (or devolved, depending on your point of view) into a more character-driven form of literature, with

more emphasis on the "why" of a crime's commission than a "who" or "how." It's interesting to note that the only story that has any connection to ratiocination is "Street of the Dead House," by Robert Lopresti, which is "Murders of the Rue Morgue" told from the point of view of the orangutan (this also appeared in *The Best Dark Fantasy and Horror* 2016).

So what we get is really crime stories, which is fine. There are some heavy hitters in this volume, including Stephen King, writing about a rural murder in "A Death" (I would have thought King would have given us a twist in this story, but the killer is known throughout) and Elmore Leonard, with "Something to Do," about a stand-off between a mild-mannered veterinarian and some scumbags. Chloroform always comes in handy. King, as usual, knows how to open a story: "Jim Trusdale had a shack on the west side of his father's gone-to-seed ranch, and that was where he was when Sheriff Barclay and half a dozen deputized townsmen found him, sitting in the one chair by the cold stove, wearing a dirty barn coat and reading an old issue of the *Black Hills Pioneer* by lantern light. Looking at it, anyway."

Another good line is "I hadn't been thinking about killing Delwood. Not really. But you know how people sometimes have just had enough." That's from "Rearview Mirror," by Art Taylor, about a couple on the

move. They meet cute--she's the clerk in a convenience store, and he robs it and she gives him her number. "On September 12, 1994, in my second week of college, I killed Russell Gramercy," begins Brian Tobin's "Entwined," one of the better stories here. The narrator has killed a man accidentally in a car accident, and is of course guilt-ridden. But there's a great twist.

I also liked "Border Crossing," an homage to "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," but on the Mexican border, by Susan Thornton, and the very suspenseful "Christmas Eve at the Exit," by Kristine Kathryn Rush, about a mother and girl on the run from an abusive husband. Also full of suspense is Georgina Ruth's "The Mountain Top," set in the near future when a farmer and his wife deal with a pair of toughs. There's also a Western story in here, "Christians," by Tom Franklin.

I'm hard pressed to name my favorite story. I very much liked Evan Lewis' "The Continental Opposite," which revives Dashiell Hammet's old hard-boiled private eye, and "Fool Proof," by Bruce Robert Coffin, is also something of an homage, both to a part of Les Misérables and a Twilight Zone episode.

But I think the best this year goes to the opening story, "The Little Men," by Meghan Abbott. It's a hard story to summarize, but it's set in old Hollywood and captures the allure of that era. It's not so much the story but the fantastic writing that hooked me. And if you have ever thought you heard something scratching behind the walls, it will get you spooked.

So I guess the days of the whodunit and locked-room mystery are over, but writers are still putting their interesting stamps on the genre, and I'm eager to read them.

Ex Libris Haley says

Meh. Usually I read the Best American Science and Nature Writing, which I always find very interesting. Not so the case with the mystery stories. Out of 20 stories, only 5 or 6 really impressed me. My favorite two stories were The Death by Stephen King (no surprise there) and Entwined by Brian Tobin. Meh.

Erick Mertz says

Only meh here. A lot of the writing was solid, stories strong, but the loose definition of mystery leaves me wanting more. Only loosely involving a crime?

I'm also aggravated by the inclusion of Steven King. This was a mystery? Good story with a great character at the heart, but there was no mystery involved in the story, only an obvious twist.

Also, there was scarcely any genre mystery. No weird. Nothing supernatural. Nothing in the sci-if realm. I hardly believe this is the best mystery fiction of the year.

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Jeff says

In a collection of mysteries I think it is more likely to have some hit or misses. We all pretty much know what to expect in a best fiction set, but mysteries range across such a gamut of type and style. Your not going to please all the people, or even most of them, much of the time.

The first story is called " The Little Men." Our protagonist, Penny, takes a small rental in a run down motel. She works with the studios as a makeup artist. She has ended a relationship with a higher up at the set but she bares him no ill will, as long as his last maintenance check clears. She is having trouble sleeping though. She wakes in the night and hears what must be mice in the wall, sees strange lights, all in all it's disconcerting. Later when a couple of long time residents, gay gents she believes, tells her the legend of someone committing suicide in her room she feels even more concerned. A bit below average in content.

Steve Almond writes " Ok, Now Do You Surrender " which is more effective. A man finds himself visited by a couple of mob goons. What makes this strange is he is not the type. He owes no debts, he does not deal in vice or crime. What are they asking him about? An argument, of a fit he threw about his wife sending thank you cards after his daughters birthday party. When questioned about this and strongly encouraged to apologize he wonders, did his wife hire gangsters. In the end it's not quite what you expect. Also it seems that Greek yogurt can be a subject of great controversy. Sometimes it seems our children really do want us to stay together.

Next we come to " Towards the Company of Others ", a story about a down on his luck fellow who visits desolate neighborhoods in an attempt to strip abandoned houses of anything of value. Scrap metal, copper piping, just what you would expect. On this day he finds something unexpected. He hears a faint cry from the cellar and finds an emaciated boy chained to a cot in a darkened corner of the room. This man is a thief but he is not a criminal. Eventually he frees the boy and gets him to a hospital giving us an easy example of the different definitions of good and bad.

" Fool Proof " is the first story that is a true standout. Billy is a man in prison for along time. He has figured out a plan. With meticulous research he knows when the used barrels of kitchen grease are picked up each week. Over the course of the year he gets his behavior in line, and begins working as a kitchen worker. Eventually he is given more freedom inside the kitchen. His plan is simple, find one person to help him get inside a barrel, have his cousin drive the truck that comes in and once free of the jail his brother can set him free with a big head start. He is only worried about the one prison guard that has it in for him. Fortunately that day it is only Barrett, a guard who treats him with respect, almost like a friend, he comes in contact with. Later we watch the plan come to fruition. Mel the cook who is eager to see an escape work bolts him into the the barbell and marks it for his brother to know which one to unload. Alas, nothing goes as planned. Inexplicably his driver unloads the wrong barrel and Billy, with only twenty minutes of oxygen inside the barrel is doomed. The story ends with Mel the cook and Barrett the " nice " guard contemplating when Billy figured out that he had been double crossed. We learn why Mel marked the wrong barrel for unloading. It seems when you kill a young woman you should no everyone inside the prison who might be related to her.

The next story is called " Safety " and while it is well written it is also simply not enjoyable because of the subject matter. It is painful to read as it addresses a realistic scenario of a school shooting. It is, well written, but it is just too raw a nerve.

Not as well written is a story titled " Christians " in which we follow a woman whose husband is killed and, a couple of decades later, her son is killed by men in the same family. Making it worse is the knowledge that in

both cases her menfolk were on the wrong side of right.

A rare Stephen King story published in The New Yorker titled " A Death " is, as might be expected, a standout. We watch Jim Truesdale arrested by the local Sheriff and charged with the murder of a small little girl in town, taken on her way to buy candy with her birthday money. While his hat is found at the murder site he insists he is innocent. Soon enough a trial with a preordained outcome is taking place and the lawman becomes convinced he is not guilty. After all the girls coin is missing and they had searched all over his house, fields, and any path from town to his home. Having been arrested just a couple hours after the crime what could he have done with it were he guilty. Still he was found guilty and hung, the Sheriff, unsure as he was, could not stop the inevitable. Later he received a call from the coroner, the silver dollar had been found.

Another standout titled " For Something to Do " is an old Elmore Leonard short. In this tale a man and his wife are visited by her ex and her cousin. Still living in the big city, while the couple are living in the country farming, they look down on them and mock the gentle farmer. Eventually their bullying turns violent and threats are made. The ex being an ex military, now rising professional boxer makes clear he would like to resume his relationship and dares the man to object. After things go poorly for him physically the man resolves that he must settle the score that very day or he will lose both his wife's, and just as importantly, his own sense of self respect.

From Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine we receive a not great story titled " The Continental Opposite ". Mixing characters from a local mob, a Mother's relationship with her son and second husband, as well as a local detective agency working in a corrupt pairing with local law enforcement the pieces are there for a story but is told in such a dated way as to not appeal.

" Street of the Dead House " offers a real change of pace as our narrator is a great ape. Telling us his story of being captured in the jungle and the taught to understand and communicate clearly with humans using sign language it seems his story will be positive. It turns anything but, however, when a criminal learns of his talent and steals him from the professor to use him for nefarious plans.

" Lafferty's Ghost " is an interesting tale. A man has been dragged to a marriage counselor. He has a real problem with a wandering eye, as well as the rest of his body. He tests his talent by seducing the counselor and is contemplating what this means as he lays in bed with her. They are interrupted by men with guns and it becomes apparent that their are bigger secrets that what he is keeping from his wife.

Elbert Queen magazine offers " The Tankyard " and it seems to be stronger than its brethren mystery magazines offering. In this a pizza delivery driver is dating a woman who might be a bit out of his league. Still he is going to school and working two jobs, he also works for the town in the tank yard. What she does not know is that he is also delivering meth with his pizzas. What he does know is her Mother is a recovering drug addict. What he does not know, also, is her Mother is one of his regular customers. When these facts collide romance seems unlikely to last.

In the story " Trash " we meet Will who is glad to have his summer job on a trash truck. His Father, who is in the union, got him the job. It seems quite a few of the older long timers hire college kids to work their shifts and pay them a flat wage. Totally illegal but that's the way it's done. The job is not bad except for the heat and the smell. And the worst smell of all is the section in Chinatown picking up the baking, dripping trash from the Chinese restaurants. On this day Will looks at a bag stretched thin in that heat amongst the piles in the sidewalk, liquid of an unknown origin seeps from the bag. When he picks the bag up it rips a bit and out comes a hand. He notices other bags appear to have other parts. He freezes, making his driver, a veteran nervous telling him to just take the bag and move. Evidently this is not a new thing. When a thin, attractive

woman comes out and lifts the slimy bag into the trash truck and encourages him to help with the rest he does so but he decides right then and there that is his last day on the trash route.

Talk about a sad story, " Christmas Eve at the Exit ", another entry from Ellery Queen Magazine, will qualify in spades. We meet Rachel, a young Mother traveling with her small daughter Anne Marie. The little ones great concern is will Santa find them as they have been in a different motel every night. They are on the run, she is tracking under an assumed name, she had, in fact, gone so far as to fake her own death. She is getting help from a network that supports abused women. She is trying to get away from her abusive husband. Things appear to be going smoothly until on Christmas Eve when she treats the two of them to a nice meal she feels like the off duty Santa Claus nursing a cup, of coffee is watching her a little too closely.

A nice story, with a surprising edge is " The Mountain Top." Jeff and Sally have been married fifty years and are enjoying their reclusive life in the mountains. Watching deer and other animals is a thing of great beauty to them. Only as the story develops do we come to realize that this is a world after a traumatic event of some type. This couple gardens, hunts, they work hard to survive. People cooperate, make due, barter, it is a throw back to a different time. When they are visited by a couple of unkempt men from a group of squatters down in the valley the situation quickly becomes life and death.

George is a retired " Mailman" and from that this story gets its title. George is a month or two away from retirement. He does not really look forward to it. His wife passed away a few years ago and he loves his neighborhood, having known some of these families for decades. Recently some folks have moved in and don't fit in, they are not nice, don't socialize. But that's ok. Then a man moves into one of the newly built McMansions. He puts up walls and gates. He never acknowledges his neighbors and gets strange overseas packages everyday. With some detective work that makes him uncomfortable, in forty plus years George has never broken the rules for mail carriers, he learns that this mystery man is involved in financial crimes with some apparent gangsters from overseas. Deciding to see what he can do to trip him up he is more successful than even he expected to be. But, while he stops the new man in the neighborhood, he also has an unexpected ending for himself as well.

" Rearview Mirror " is an above average story that is highlighted with a small feature that is beyond your expectation, one that creates a smile without fail. A woman has met a man named Delwood. How did she meet him, well it seems he was robbing the convenience store she was working at, and asked for her number. And, he actually called her, and she actually decided to date him. From there the story is pretty straightforward. He stops robbing after getting a nest egg. She wants to spend, he wants to save. Finally she has had about enough, but then something changes again.

" Border Crossing " follows a young woman, kid napped from her family in an interior Mexican village. As they are crossing the border into the United States she knows she must escape. These girls will end up as prostitutes, or worse. Seeing an opportunity we see her getaway, finding her way out onto the highway to be rescued by an American couple heading South. They put her on a bus home and she is thrilled to see her house as she approaches, her Mother will be so happy. Then the story reverts to us hearing a shout telling her to stop. All has taken place in her mind just as she contemplated running. It is not a happy ending.

What would happen if a few years after you killed someone in a horrible accident t you found out that that person was committing horrible crimes. When these came to light does it absolve you of your guilt. This is the story from " Alfred Hitchcock Magazine " called " Entwined ". A young man hits a father as he stumbles off a walkway into the road. Nothing he could have done yet he feels guilt. Remorse, plus unrequited feelings from the mans daughter, a local hottie that he had always lusted over. Then years later he finds out, along with everyone else, the man was a murderer. And worse. The girl, now a middle aged woman who has

not aged well reaches out to him and he learns more than he knew, and eventually, to leave her a tiny bit of peace of mind, learns something he decides not to share about that day when her Father stumbled in front of him.

The last story, about a Doctor working in Africa, with aging parents at home, and rabies epidemics in country was convoluted, Long and confusing and did not work for me.

Nancy says

I very rarely give “Best American” anthologies five stars because there are usually one or two pieces that I don’t care for. But this compilation was special in that I enjoyed all twenty stories. While some of them I liked better than others, they were all very engaging, well written, as well as encompassed a diverse selection of themes that constitute great writing within the genre. If you’re a short story and mystery/crime lover I highly recommended the 2016 compilation. My favorite entry was “Entwined” by Brian Tobin.
