

Divine Deduction

Christian crime fiction comes of age.

BY JON L. BREEN

Houston detective Roland March is in many ways a typical police procedural protagonist.

He's a troubled big city cop with lone wolf tendencies. Though unquestionably a good guy, sometimes the only good guy in the room, he has his personal demons and unattractive traits. He's as likely to tangle with his department's Internal Affairs Division as with the villains. Admirable as he may be in his intentions, he often drives those around him nuts. Other prominent examples include Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch, Ian Rankin's John Rebus, Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander, and Jo Nesbø's Harry Hole.

As the formidable stylists Connelly and Rankin bring to life Bosch's Southern California and Rebus's Edinburgh, J. Mark Bertrand proves their equal, capturing March's Texas home ground vividly in passages like this from *Pat-tern of Wounds* (2011):

Against a backdrop of tall pines, a statue of Sam Houston looms over I-45, marking my arrival in the prison town of Huntsville. He's made of concrete atop a granite base, but to me the lack of detail from the neck down makes him look like an oversized soap carving. This morning the great man is wreathed in fog, glowering down on the half-empty highway, bone white against the gray sky.

The Roland March novels follow a standard pattern in contemporary series mystery fiction: tragic backstory; numerous continuing characters; story elements carrying over from book to book, with enough revealed to

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make reading the books in order if not obligatory, at least highly desirable.

This is not necessarily the best way to go for most writers, but J. Mark Bertrand uses the conventions brilliantly. The main action sticks to the case at hand, without frequent detours so a favorite character can put in an obligatory appearance. The police procedure has a feel of authenticity, with extensive detail of weaponry and forensics, and the course of the investigation bears some of the messiness of real life. The narrative energy is relentless. The visual, cinematic style sticks to a single first-person viewpoint, a unity some contemporary thriller writers violate to their detriment. Present-tense narrative annoys some readers (including this one at times), but its sense of urgency and immediacy is effective in the March novels.

Bertrand is a major crime-fiction talent—one of the best police procedural writers I've come upon in years—but he has not reached nearly the wide audience he deserves for a simple reason: His novels come from a religious publisher.

A quarter-century ago, for an essay collection on Judeo-Christian religion in mystery fiction, I read several detective novels from Christian publishers. Directed at a traditional evangelical audience, they were clearly produced under rather severe editorial restrictions. One author told me that at least one conversion per book was a requirement. In a scene involving an elaborate dinner party at a secular think tank, the food on offer was described in detail, but at no point was there any reference to before-dinner drinks or wine with dinner—not even so that the pure hero could turn them down. The scene occurred in a book published by Bethany Fellowship.

Under those taboos, you might manage a village cozy, a gothic romance, or the gentler sort of classical whodunit. But could you shoehorn a down-and-dirty 21st-century police procedural into Bethany's tight guidelines? Not likely.

In recent years, however, Christian fiction publishing has changed. In its current submission guidelines, the rebranded Bethany House requires "an intriguing, well-written story with well-developed characters, a compelling plot, colorful description, and a strong authorial voice" along with "a coherent, identifiable theme and/or particular characters who reflect Christian values or teachings without being preachy."

Writers for this market now have a greater opportunity to consider sex, explicit violence, and multiple viewpoints on controversial moral and ethical issues. Though the taboo against bad language remains in play, Christian novelists may now be less fettered than Hollywood filmmakers of the 1940s, who managed to overcome Production Code strictures to produce meaningful and sophisticated work.

A variety of worthy writers have taken advantage of this new freedom: Readers of Scott Turow and John Grisham might look for the courtroom novels of Randy Singer or James Scott Bell; and those who cherish the locked-room puzzles of John Dickson Carr could investigate Michael Lister's novels and stories about prison chaplain John Jordan.

But Bertrand may be the finest of the lot. Though unquestionably committed to his religious beliefs, the creator of Roland March would be bored by a protagonist who lacked human frailties or believed he had all the answers. The character is not even a practicing Christian in the three novels he has appeared in to date. Bertrand is so attracted to antiheroes that, when he lists his favorite British TV detectives on his website, he almost apologizes for including the unambiguous straight-arrow sleuth of *Foyle's War*.

The first novel in the March series, *Back on Murder* (2010), begins with the very bloody murder of gang-connected loan shark Octavio Morales, the graphic description of whose body immediately clues in the reader that this isn't a novel

likely to have sold to Bethany Fellowship. More reassuring is the summary of the Houston cops as less foul-mouthed than their Dallas counterparts, who star in their own reality show: “And no matter who you are—a shirtless banger with enough ink on your skin to write a circuit court appeal or a corner skank in a skintight halter—we’ll address you as sir or ma’am.”

However, March adds, “We are polite not because we are polite, but because we want to send you to Huntsville for the balance of your natural life, or even stick you with that needle of fate.”

Roland March is introduced as an over-the-hill detective, discounted by his colleagues, back provisionally in homicide after being consigned to a sting operation intending to lure in felons with a free-car offer. He would like to regain his old stature, which included being the hero of a true-crime book called *The Kingwood Killing*. March often has to fight not only the perps but also his own colleagues, who are sometimes bent and frequently have other agendas. He is happily married to a lawyer, though a tragedy in their past and her increasing religiosity cause some tensions in their relationship. The personal trauma that precipitated March’s fall (though hinted at) is not revealed until late in the book. One clue: In a bar, March orders a whiskey sour but doesn’t intend to drink it, for reasons not immediately explained.

The novel’s main case, which may or may not be eventually connected to the death of Octavio Morales, involves the disappearance of teenager Hannah Mayhew, whose evangelist father Peter died years before under unusual circumstances. Though uncommitted religiously, March will encounter many believers both professionally and personally, among them youth pastor Carter Robb, with whom March will have an odd sort of mentoring relationship.

A telling description of the raw and inexperienced Robb exemplifies the author’s skill at characterization:

To his credit, he looks me straight in the eye. Set deep in that uncomplicated face, its perfect symmetry exuding all-American innocence, his gaze seems incongruous, darkened by an unearned seriousness, the sort brought on by books and too many grave conversations. . . . [He] somehow manages to project an old man’s world-weariness, an acquaintance with pain that contradicts his unlined skin.



J. Mark Bertrand

The plot of this first March case is complex, the action-finale expertly done, the surprises efficiently sprung. The denouement invites a theological discussion about the concept of forgiveness.

In the second book, *Pattern of Wounds*, March is confronted with the possibility that the resolution of his signature case, the murder of Nicole Faulk and the conviction of her husband Donald that was the topic of *The Kingwood Killing*, may have been a mistake. The murder may have actually been the work of a prolific serial killer whose crimes consist of the stabbing deaths of women in or near bodies of water, from ditches and reservoirs to swimming pools and bathtubs. The current murder of Simone Walker fits the pattern, and the crime scene appears to have been staged to resemble a photo from *The Kingwood Killing*. The hero-worshipping author of

the book that made a celebrity of March now emerges as an adversary.

While the three novels are of nearly equal merit, *Nothing to Hide* (2012) may be the best of the lot. A headless corpse has been identified as gun-dealer Brandon Ford, who is extensively documented but doesn’t really exist, leaving March in a unique situation: investigating the murder of the cover identity of an FBI informant. Occasional flashbacks to March’s experiences as a military policeman at Fort Benning and his

encounter with a CIA agent known as Magnum, told in past tense, could stand alone as a powerful short story. Spy novel and police procedural meet in a complex but completely comprehensible plot of double-dealing. At one point, March acquires a civilian sidekick, a conspiracy theorist who is a confirmed atheist. Far from producing a Christian equivalent of those courtroom mysteries in which the defense has all the good lines and the prosecution has nothing, Bertrand gives his atheist and agnostic characters (sometimes including March himself) pretty persuasive arguments.

The books deliver a sincere and admirably understated spiritual message, but they are far from dramatized Sunday school lessons.

J. Mark Bertrand deserves a wider readership than a religious publisher affords. Many writers are able to carry readers along by employing nice phrases and descriptive passages, bits of humor, character involvement, and curiosity about how it will all turn out. But few have Bertrand’s relentless narrative power. His website states he will write more March cases if he can find a new publisher, suggesting the three-book original contract was a commercial (surely not spiritual) failure for Bethany House. Perhaps the ideal new publisher would be a major mainstream house, one that won’t ask Bertrand to compromise his beliefs but can get behind this extraordinary writer and gain him the wide audience he deserves. ♦