

## **CONSPIRACIES AND CATASTROPHES – BOOK REVIEWS BY RICHARD COTTER.**

Is it too early to nominate the best spy thriller of the year? Not when you've just read *THE ACCIDENT MAN* (Bantam Press), Tom Cain's explosive debut in the action man/conspiracy theory genre. It's been ten years since the death of Diana, HRH Princess of Wales, and her demise has always been shrouded in controversy. This fictional account mines that controversy to devastating effect in an all too plausible plot. The Accident Man of the title is Sam Carver, ex SAS now a gun for hire to create "accidents" to miscreants and despots, gunrunners, drug dealers, terrorists. After a sensational "pre title sequence" where he hobbles a helicopter and sends its drug baron occupant to hell, Carver scarpers to New Zealand for a well-earned holiday. His paymasters interrupt his idyll by sending him to Paris to manufacture a tangle in a tunnel. Mission accomplished, Carver finds himself as target of a set up and a double cross, which involves his shadowy employers, The Consortium, the Russian Mafia, MI5 and MI6. Action adventure narrative doesn't come much better than this, as Cain substitutes ink for adrenalin, powering his pen with compulsive characterisation, gut wrenching, page turning momentum, and a plot to give the most sceptical anti-conspiracy theorist pause.

*THE ACCIDENT MAN* has all the rippling robustness of red blooded, red meat eating, and blunt instrument thriller writing in the proud tradition of Ian Fleming. Indeed, to hell with the niceties, award Tom Cain the award that bears Fleming's name right now! Like Fleming's enduring creation, James Bond, Cain's Sam Carver is a man with a tortured past, and both are physically and mentally agile and tough. There are a number of resonant and reverberating nods and nudges in Carver's debut that reminds one of Bond's first mission *Casino Royale*, the two most obvious being the duplicitous femme fatale and the leg crossing, nut numbing, genuinely alarming torture sequence. The recent release of the film version of *Casino Royale* also aids in reinforcing and superimposing Daniel Craig's face and physique onto the character of Sam Carver.

Genre homage notwithstanding THE ACCIDENT MAN deserves its own accolades, a vigorous, exciting, violent, sadistic and sexy piece of mayhem with a sizable knowledgeableness about guns, geography and seamanship.

Find a grassy knoll to stretch out have a read. Too big for just one novel as we encompass the tenth anniversary of the event, Eoin McNamee's 12.23 (Faber) is a grimier, grittier, grubbier look at the toll in the tunnel that hot August night.

Where THE ACCIDENT MAN is more tonally James Bond or Jason Bourne, 12.23 is the more akin to the murkier morass of Le Carre's Smiley circus, or Deighton's Harry Palmer, or TV's Callan. Right from the get go, Diana Spencer is a damsel in distress, stalked by shadowy figures, a pack that makes the paparazzi look like playful puppies in contrast to these hunting hounds of havoc, these hyenas of hazard, baying for her blood. This is a dark and fractured fairytale with the princess in peril, no Prince Charming, and a carriage that is destined to deliver her to death's door. We know where and when this story will have its happy never after end, but it's the who and why that whets our appetite and keeps the hunger alive.

The canapés of conspiracy, the hors d'oeuvres of duplicity, the unsavoury surveillance by state spooks and celebrity snappers, keep us well fuelled and fed until the cold collation of the main course, served underground, among the crumpled carnage, the mangled metal of a Mercedes, dead as a dodo Dodi and Diana distressed and dying. Chauffeur Henri Paul shuffled off his mortal coil and bodyguard Rees-Jones literally off his face. Phone taps, secret snaps, cover ups, black ops, spies and eyes, subterfuge and wild surmise that are something huge. McNamee adds to the mix of intrigue the cult of The Order of the Solar Temple, thus meshing the fates of two blonde modern princesses, Grace and Diana, both of who died in car wrecks; both deaths shrouded in mystery and myth. A modern day Hitchcock will have a ball with the movie version.

Hot on the heels of the 10th Anniversary of the Death of Diana comes the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the toppling of the Twin Towers. That dastardly deed of infamous bastardy is central to Don DeLillo's latest novel, FALLING MAN

(Picador). It begins: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night." Keith has survived the attack and descended the doomed tower and finds his way back to his estranged wife Lianne and son Justin. A late summer day reduced to near night, a set of skyscrapers incinerated, by the poisonous hand of suicidal Saracens with an edifice complex. From this rubble and ruin comes a reconciliation of husband and wife, of father and son, an intimate family reunion of a unit reunified by the ransacking of reason, the reverberations of which ramp up the paranoia. Husband stays but strays with another survivor. Wife sways and in a daze takes a swipe at a neighbour for playing Middle Eastern music. Son takes to scouring the sky with his mates, binoculars focused for the first fleeting sight of the flights forecast by Bill Lawton. Bill Lawton is the name the kids have heard, or rather, misheard; Bin Laden sounds like Bill Lawton to kids who know something big and bad has happened no matter how hard their parents try to shield them from the horror. Bill Lawton is the mastermind of the mass attacks and the kids are fixated on more flights of fundamentalist fatwa freaks, faith fuelled fools, crash and burn jihadists, planning to raze their high rise. Their paranoia causes them to hide in plain sight at the windows of their multi-storey dwellings. In plain sight and appearing at a number of sites, a performance artist, calling himself Falling Man, leaps from ledges, bungees from bridges and belfries, dangles from balconies, suspending the disbelief of the burgers of the Big Apple, a living *memori mortis*, a brave new chronicler of the age of terror. This is what DeLillo has been it seems, all through his career.

### **FILM REVIEWS by RICHARD COTTER**

A couple of astonishing documentaries about musicians warrant serious attention. SHUT UP AND SING (M) is Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck's travels with the Dixie Chicks in the wake of lead singer Natalie Maine's infamous anti Bush comment of 2003 – "we are ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas." This anti Iraq War sentiment ditched the Dixies knee deep in doo doo, with many Americans baying for their blood and a boycott on their business.

SHUT UP AND SING is an examination of the popular artist's conundrum of free speech – to speak freely, and by being political perhaps attracts the ire of your fan base, or to keep your political views to yourself and not comment on what ordinary citizens can do openly. In the course of the movie, the group take time out to rethink, write songs, have babies, and relaunch with a new album containing a blistering response to past pillories.

Go Girls!

Punk chronicler Julien Temple's STRUMMER: THE FUTURE IS UNWRITTEN (MA) is, as the title suggests a film about The Clash front man, Joe Strummer. At 125 minutes its a major look at the fifty full on years that Strummer strutted this great stage of life, leading one of Britain's seminal bands, writing film music, and becoming a broadcaster on the BBC. His "London Calling" broadcasts are presented in the film as a rolling narrative of his musical tastes and influences and create a chain link for Temple to pin his patchwork of images on. Here be found footage, filmed interviews, recorded concerts, film clips, and home movies, collated and collaged into a fascinating biography, narrated by subject, friends, colleagues, and the music made and played.

It goes without saying that this is a must for Clash fans but a wider audience will find this examination of a life lived to the full, let lie fallow, then resurrected for one final blaze of glory, just as fascinating, engaging and thrilling. You should go and you should stay.

The FINAL WINTER (M) is the best football drama to come out of Australia since David Williamson's THE CLUB. It's the story of Grub Henderson the captain of the Newtown Jets the team forced out of first grade competition in NSW in the early 1980s because of corporate pressures. The early 1980s saw the sport of rugby league in upheaval. As the winds of change sweep across the rugby league landscape, Grub Henderson [Matt Nable] defiantly stands among all others as the embodiment of those before him. Foreign codes of business are tearing at the fabric of the loyalty that exists between Grub and his club and family. In this Inner West Side Story, once you're a Jet you're a Jet all the way. He collides head-on with an administration eager to bury him, headed by club president Colgate Perry (John Jarratt) and battles

against his brother (Nathaniel Dean)) and coach's (Matthew Johns) betrayal. At home, his wife (Raelee Hill) is troubled by the transformation of the man she married, and his children are left wanting for their father. In a bid to cling to his self-worth, Grub bitterly swallows his pride and bargains for his future. As the game that provides him an identity crumbles, he finds acceptance in the man he could be. Written by its leading man, Matt Nable, the film is rich in narrative and characterisation and has a whole heap of heart. That would be enough to get it over the line as a must see Aussie flick, but the technical aspects of the film are matched Try for Try, to give a premiership performance. THE FINAL WINTER was edited by Sydney-based Matthew Villa, fresh from working on Happy Feet, in collaboration with co-director Brian Andrews. It was Matt Villa who introduced the team to his brother-in-law, sound editor Wayne Pashley, the double-AFI winner and principal at Sydney's Big Bang Sound Design, also straight off Happy Feet. From happy feet to stropky footballers, it's been a snappy feat for Villa whose sound design lifts this film from pretty bloody good to bloody terrific. Normally it's the big CGI blockbusters that steal the thunder in sound, but this low budget boomer brings home the bacon big time. It's almost worth the price of admission to "see" the sound. With THE FINAL WINTER shot on HD tape rather than traditional film, Olivier Fontenay – considered to be one of world's best film graders – oversaw the transfer from tape to film [film-out to 35mm], as well treating the movie with a full Digital Intermediate [DI] grade. His work is most dramatically notable in the football sequences where his colouring creates the atmosphere of a gladiatorial battlefield. Adam Gock, who had recently forged a new partnership with the respected local composer, Dinesh Wicks Quickly, and for next to no money, provided THE FINAL WINTER with an appropriately stirring soundtrack. The soundtrack for THE FINAL WINTER also features some classic Aussie rock, original recordings from the early 1980s such as "Without You" by Eurogliders, "Comin' Home" by The Radiators, "After The Rain" by The Angels and "Short Note" by Matt Finish.

Directed by Jane Forrest and Brian Andrews, THE FINAL WINTER is not just a crowning achievement of Australian independent film making – shot on a shoe string, posted on a boot strap – but a movie that has the makings of a classic in home grown film culture.

In direct and stunning contrast, DR PLONK (G) the latest project from maverick moviemaker Rolf de Heer, is a silent slapstick, with musical accompaniment composed by Graham Tardif and played by The Stiletto Sisters and Samantha White. This playful homage to a bygone era is lots of fun if a little overextending even at 84 minutes, which exceeds by 30 minutes the run time of most Chaplin and Keaton and Sennett, which it seeks to recreate. Dr Plonk, labouring in his laboratory in 1907 has calculated that the world will end in 2008 and engineers a time machine to proceed to that year and prove his prediction. This causes all sorts of predicaments as he gets into a pickle with cannibals and capitalists, while being catapulted from past to present and a future that isn't what it used to be. Shot with short ends and a hand cranked camera, the picture looks the real reel deal and De Heer deserves a hats off for binging back the boot up the bracket brand of broad comedy. Eat your heart out Mel Brooks.