

Short & Sweet

Short Stories Considered

by Ben Boulden

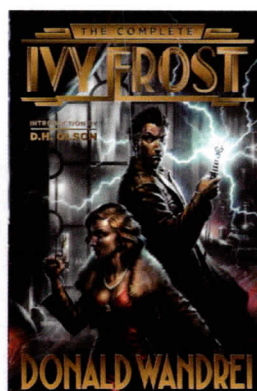
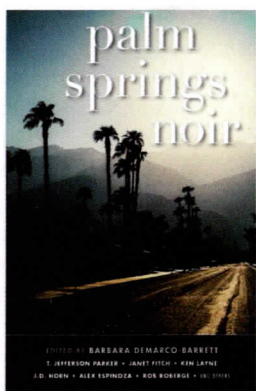
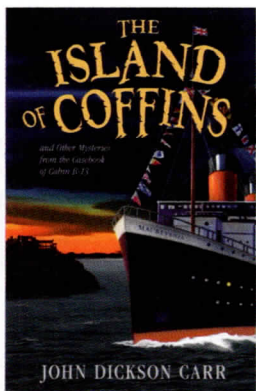
The Island of Coffins and Other Mysteries from the Casebook of Cabin B-13, edited by Tony Medawar and Douglas Greene (Crippen & Landru, \$22), is a wonderful collection of 23 never-before-published radio plays from John Dickson Carr's CBS radio program, *Cabin B-13*. The program consisted of two series and ran Monday nights between July 1948 and January 1949. The bulk of these manuscripts were lost until their discovery in the Library of Congress in the early-1990s. According to Tony Medawar's enlightening introduction, nine of the 11 plays from the first series were original concepts, while eight of the 12 episodes from the second series were reworked scripts from Carr's earlier BBC radio programs, *Suspense* and *Appointment With Fear*.

Dr. John Fabian, ship surgeon and resident of Cabin B-13, of "the luxury-liner, *Mauvevania*," is the narrator of each episode. Fabian has an intimate knowledge of the baffling mysteries, which range from traditional whodunits to impossible crimes. The first story, "A Razor in Fleet Street," is about an American diplomat in Southampton, his criminal doppelgänger, and a locked-room murder. "The Man Who Couldn't Be Photographed" is a brilliant puzzler about a silent-era film star, Bruce Ransom, whose studio photographs, taken by three separate photographers in different locations, are mysteriously ruined by the same evil-looking blemish. The solution is sensible and perfectly disguised until the last moments.

All 23 scripts are entertaining and even perplexing. They, as one might expect, feel like old radio plays, but there is enough description included to provide each story with a setting, develop the characters' motivations, and—without the reader even trying—the background foley sounds and music strikes a fine mental tune from the first line to the last.

Palm Springs Noir, edited by Barbara

DeMarco-Barrett (Akashic, \$16.95), is an appealing anthology of 14 stories about life and crime in the Mojave Desert's playground to the stars. The tales range from murder to revenge to lies and betrayal. DeMarco-Barrett, in her introduction, defines noir as a story type where characters' "bad choices [make] things go from bad to worse." A definition I like, and even better, the stories included hit that mark again and again. Janet Fitch's "Sunrise" is a smoothly told tale about fraud and loss, and that common



human ailment, an inability to realize what we have is better than it could be.

"A Career Spent Disappointing People," by Tod Goldberg, is a wack and terrific Elmore Leonard-style story about a career criminal and his very bad day. There is a hospital visit, a fruitless dash for Mexico, and a scary clown. Eric Beetner's "The Guest" is an ironic murder tale that reminds us everything falls apart when more than one person knows a secret. "Specters," by T. Jefferson Parker, is the anthology's least noir story. It was also, at least initially, the most disappointing, but its quiet narrative about war memories and a missing woman rattled in my thoughts long after it had ended, which, ultimately, made it a favorite.

Palm Springs Noir also includes excellent stories from J. D. Horn, Chris J. Bahnsen, Michael Craft, and Kelly Shire.

The Complete Ivy Frost, by Donald Wandrei (Haffner, \$50), collects all 18 of the I.V. Frost detective stories, published between 1934 and 1937 in the pulp mystery magazine *Clues Detective*. Professor "Ivy"

Frost demands his cases be "perplexing riddles" which, along with his "too good-looking assistant" Jean Moray, he solves with the deductive logic of Sherlock Holmes and the technological know-how of Doc Savage. "Green Man—Creeping" begins as an impossible crime where a wealthy household is, seemingly, being scared to death one by one, but it transforms into an excellent variety of bizarre with a brilliant solution. "Death Descending" is a satisfying and odd story about statues crashing to Earth, shattering into pieces, and turning into human flesh. Weird, yes, and very good, too.

The Complete Ivy Frost is a wonderful introduction to an author known more for his pulp horror and science fiction than his mystery, and to a character who will be new to most modern mystery readers, which makes it all the more fun.

Night, Neon, Joyce Carol Oates' latest collection (Mysterious Press, \$25.95), is stocked with nine wonderfully dark, at times humorous, and always meaningful stories about murder, betrayal, rape, and fear. "Detour" is a painful tale about loss and, ultimately, ironic death as a middle-aged woman descends into claustrophobic and terrifying dementia. "Miss Golden Dreams" is an ironic, darkly humorous, and thought-provoking story of exploitation, about a one-of-a-kind (perfect) robotic version of Marilyn Monroe being auctioned by Sotheby's. "Parole Hearing, California Institution for Women, Chino Ca" is the shortest story in the collection, but its themes about perception, reality, victimization, and the discovery that sometimes people do get what they deserve, are pitch perfect.

All of the stories in *Night, Neon* are driven by character, rather than plot, and every tale, while always entertaining, has something important to say about women and culture. These stories, and just about everything Joyce Carol Oates writes, steps beyond literary genre and into that sacred place reserved for true art.

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