



## Point of Origin

by Patricia Cornwell; Little Brown 1998; 342 pp; \$24.95 softcover.

Be afraid, be very afraid — if not of the gruesome detail in Patricia Cornwell's latest forensic thriller then of the dedication. If it's to *the Barbara Bush* then I think we have cause for concern.

I don't remember the author's conservative law and order agenda being so obvious in her previous books. A fair amount of space in *Point of Origin* is devoted to speeches about the unfair advantages that the criminally insane have over their prey — such outrageous privileges as access to therapeutic programs when incarcerated(!).

Despite the bursts of dubious ideology, Cornwell's latest Scarpetta novel is great entertainment. We're back in the evil world of Carrie Grethen, former associate of Temple Brooks Gault. The plot involves extreme physical violence and arson so it's certainly not for those with woopsy stomachs. I got so involved that at one point I was reading it over breakfast. Not recommended.

As always, the novel has educative potential if you can take in the detail about fuel loads, flashpoints and helicopter navigation systems. Lucy's new boss is an engaging character who provides an interesting counterpoint to Scarpetta — could be she'll turn up again.

I think it's a bit outrageous that the publishers are charging little less than they would for a hardback but you'll probably buy it anyway — you know you want to. ● FW

## Peace Crimes

by Sandy McCutcheon; Harper Collins, 1998; 486 pp; \$13.95 softcover.

One of the consistently entertaining features of detective novels and thrillers — even bad ones — is the way in which they always seem to trash lawyers. *Peace Crimes*, the latest 'thrilling novel of murder and political intrigue'

from ABC Radio National host Sandy McCutcheon, contains at least one such 'pompous oaf': McCutcheon engages with the often tedious novelistic device of having legal proceedings at the climax of the drama, but in the end makes the wise choice of detonating his courtroom with plastic explosive. Which is just as well, because an amusing impatience with lawyers ('exceeded only by a distrust of government officials and police') is the only thing going for *Peace Crimes*. The plot may be promising: it shows us vodka-drinking ex-KGB spy-hero Savva Golitsyn — also of *In Wolf's Clothing* — and his attempt to stymie the Australian and American branches of the Ustashi (Croatian fascists) when they try to frame an Australian-resident pro-Yugoslavia Croat for Serbian atrocities in Sarajevo. Got it? McCutcheon's accuracy when it comes to ethnic and political detail, his diligent efforts to tie his story into topical political issues (Hanson, Sandline, gun control, Aboriginal reconciliation, media manipulation of war), and his knowledge of the technology of mobile phones, are all considerable. But *Peace Crimes* is clumsily written and plodding. Even for a masochistic lawyer, not a great read. ● JM

## The Reader

by Bernhard Schlink; Phoenix House 1997; 216 pp; \$24.95 hardcover.

*The Reader* has been something of a cult hit in the English speaking world. The copy I have is from the fourth UK hardback print run. It is a timely release about the nature of power and responsibility and the possibility of redemption. Without giving away a pivotal plot secret, it is also about the implications of the state failing in its responsibility for the socialisation of citizens.

Schlink is a German law professor and crime writer. I enjoyed his spare prose and introspective style. The novel offers a refreshing perspective on adolescent sexuality that is neither cloying nor voyeuristic and it is engagingly

structured, contrasting present, past and earlier past.

I highly recommend *The Reader* but do yourself a favour and read the blurb on the inside front cover *after* you've finished the book — it gives away practically the entire story.

*The Reader* was translated from the German by Carol Brown Janeway — of starship interpreter? Sorry. ● FW

*Bits* was compiled by Jonathan Morrow and Frith Way.

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