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Winner of Eight Pulitzer Prizes

Books

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Tops in crime fiction: Best mysteries of 2011

Adam Woog's picks for the best mysteries of 2011 include books by Kate Atkinson, C.J. Box, Alan Bradley, Henning Mankell, Louise Penny, Jonathan Rabb, Jed Rubenfeld, Fred Vargas and Jacqueline Winspear.

By Adam Woog

Special to The Seattle Times

It's always a problem — but a good problem — when forced to choose the cream of the past year's crime and mystery fiction. Undaunted, your reviewer has made a list and checked it twice.

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"Started Early, Took My Dog" by **Kate Atkinson**

(*Reagan Arthur/Back Bay*). This breathtaking performance weaves together a trio of spellbinding stories.

A lonely retired cop makes a rash, illegal and wonderfully brave decision — she essentially buys an abused child to save her from a no-good junkie. An aging, endearing actress starts noticing herself slipping into dementia. And semiretired private eye Jackson Brodie (currently featured in BBC/PBS adaptations of Atkinson's books) explores the past of an adopted woman, a process that forces Brodie to confront his own familial failures. The intersecting stories resonate with shared themes of adoption, abandonment and redemption, and Atkinson brings tenderhearted wit and energy to even the bleakest scenes.

"Back of Beyond" by **C.J. Box** (*Minotaur*). Cody Hoyt is a good cop — and a drunk. When his beloved AA sponsor is murdered, Hoyt ignores protocol to chase the killer. A slim clue leads to a firm that runs horseback pack trips into Yellowstone, and as Hoyt closes in on it, the body count mounts. Wyoming native Box is a gripping writer and a shrewd observer of his state's rugged wilderness.

"A Red Herring Without Mustard" (*Bantam*) and **"I Am Half-Sick of Shadows"** (*Delacorte*) by **Alan Bradley**. A doubleheader starring Flavia de Luce, the most intrepid and charming adolescent chemist/detective/busybody in all of rural, post-World War II England. The first involves a gypsy woman, her improbably named granddaughter Porcelain, a missing child and two stolen fireplace ornaments. In the Christmas-themed second book, Flavia's village is thrown into a tizzy when murder stalks a visiting film crew.

"The Troubled Man" by **Henning Mankell** (*Knopf, translated by Laurie Thompson*). This Swedish writer was around years before *The Girl Who Became a Best-seller* hit the stands. Here, Mankell brings back his brilliant, introspective police inspector Kurt Wallander for one last, poignant case. The aging Wallander, suspended from the force because of memory problems, unofficially delves into the disappearance of his daughter's future in-laws — a mystery that hearkens back to a Cold War-era scandal.

"A Trick of the Light" by **Louise Penny** (*Minotaur*). Fans of traditional mysteries steeped in intelligence, empathy and a nice turn of phrase have a stalwart champion in Penny. This emotionally rich study in the interplay of opposites — light and dark, friendship and bitterness — unfolds as Montreal's Chief Inspector Armand Ganache examines a death in a deceptively bucolic Quebec town.

"The Second Son" by **Jonathan Rabb** (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*). It's 1936, and the chaos and violence of the Spanish Civil War are just starting. Nikolai Hoffner — a former Berlin police inspector and no fan of the Nazis — is searching dusty, rural Spain for a son who disappeared while working for anti-Franco Republicans. Hoffner's other son, meanwhile, has embraced Nazi ideals and rejected his father. Their emotional triangle lends an aura of tragedy to an already gripping story.

"The Death Instinct" by **Jed Rubinfeld** (*Riverhead*). This sprawling literary/historical mystery springs from a real event: a deadly explosion on New York's Wall Street in 1920. Were Italian anarchists to blame? In real life, the crime remains unsolved, but Rubinfeld vividly imagines a solution that becomes the backbone of a clever, absorbing and provocative story about Freud, the wartime birth of radiology, a moving love affair, financial and government corruption, and a mysterious illness striking young women in a watch factory.

"An Uncertain Place" by **Fred Vargas** (*Penguin, translated by Sian Reynolds*). Parisian police commissaire Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg has a genius for linking wildly disparate events and making near-mystical leaps of intuition. Here, Adamsberg sniffs out what connects a shocking murder in Paris with a group of shoes, complete with human feet, discovered in a London cemetery. The trail takes him to deep-seated evil creeping out of the Balkans.

"A Lesson in Secrets" by **Jacqueline Winspear** (*Harper*). Winspear's books are intriguing combinations of chilling postwar reality and the comforts of a classic British cozy. Maisie Dobbs is a perceptive and empathetic private investigator in England between the wars. As war with Germany looms, there's reason to believe that some staff members at a private college may harbor pro-Nazi feelings. England's spy network asks Dobbs to take a job there and see what's going on beneath the surface.

Adam Woog's column on crime and mystery fiction appears on the second Sunday of the month in The Seattle Times.