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BILL PRONZINI



AN AFFECTIONATE GUIDE TO THE
WORST IN MYSTERY FICTION

BANG!

GUN IN CHEEK

Gun in Cheek

By Bill Pronzini



MACABRE INK

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For all those who love a mystery

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Introduction

I think I know why Bill Pronzini asked me write an introduction to a book that really needs none. He *knows*. Not only does he know how to write good mystery novels, he also knows where to find all the *bad* ones, those he will soon define for you as "alternative classics." But more than that, he has an encyclopedic memory of the entire genre, and surely a man such as this *knows* that I myself wrote a few of these alternative classics, way back then when I was still struggling to learn my trade. Frankly, I feel a bit offended that some of my early masterpieces were passed over for consideration.

Who, for example, among any of the entrants Mr. Pronzini has chosen to include in his wonderful book could ever have written an exchange like:

"You're cute," she said. She was slightly looped, he thought, and her voice sounded deep and throaty even when she spoke. "I noticed you while I was singing, and I said to myself, He's cute. I was right."

She looked better close up, much better than she did on the bandstand. She had her hair pulled back tight over her ears, clipped at the back of her neck with an amber clasp, fanning out over her shoulders. The blouse she wore had a deep V sweeping down from her shoulders, terminating in a shadowed cleft between high breasts. He remembered staring at the soft whiteness of her skin as she leaned over the table.

"You're very cute," she repeated, and he said, "You're not bad yourself."

She blew smoke across the table. "Sparkling dialogue," she said dryly. "Refugees from a Grade-B stinkeroo."

"Pardon me. I'm not dressed for repartee."

I wrote those priceless lines. Yes, Mr. Pronzini.

Moreover, they were published.

But did this scrupulous scholar consider them worthy of inclusion in his otherwise impeccably researched and wittily informative book? I should say not. Or how about this?

And then I was falling.

I don't know what I thought as I fell. I know it seemed to take a long time, seemed to take forever, seemed never to end. I saw the ledge and the struggling figures on it, and the figures came closer, and below them I saw the twisted rocks of Hokus Pokus, waiting I kept dropping and there was a tight nausea in my throat, and a scream that never found voice. I closed my eyes, and I forced moisture from them, and I felt the wind ripping at me, and I was aware of the rope around my waist and the rush of air as I fell.

I hit. I hit with a wrenching pain that shot up the length of my leg. My body crushed onto my twisted foot, and a flash of yellow exploded inside my head. I heard someone scream, a hoarse

curse that shattered the stillness of the mountain, an anguished cry of sheer, raw pain. And then I realized that my mouth was open, and the scream was coming from my own throat.

I wrote that, too.

And it, *too*, was published, Mr. Pronzini.

Or how about:

She snatched the knife from the table, and then she took a lithe step toward my chair, gripping my hair in one hand, pulling my head back, and then lifting the knife high over my throat, a tight grin on her face.

"Aren't you, darling?" she said through clenched teeth. "Aren't you quite helpless?"

Tarrance stood frozen. Yoshi, on the other side of the tea cart, had gone suddenly pale. I sat in the chair and looked up at the tip of the carving knife, and then Adrienne began laughing shrilly, tossing the knife down onto the terrace. Yoshi picked it up.

"My wife has a keen sense of humor," I said coldly.

Now surely, if Mr. Pronzini had a decent bone in his body, he would have included at *least* this fine example of breathless suspense among those he winnowed out for honors. What else did one have to write to be considered a nominee? Was he looking for something a bit more literary? In which case, I offer the following:

The sky hung overhead like a moth-eaten gray shawl, and the flakes spilled down from it like a loose dandruff at first, lazy and slow.

I could go on. And on. (Oh, how I did go on and on in those days.) The point, of course, is that Mr. Pronzini surely knew about these gems when he was preparing his brief. He has obviously read and digested everything ever written in the genre by anyone anywhere. But even giving him the benefit of the doubt, even assuming he somehow missed these published morsels, doesn't the man ever go to the *movies*? Didn't he see the film *The Birds*, for which I wrote the screenplay? Does he truly not remember (or is his forgetfulness just a clever ploy to avoid giving me my rightful due?) the birthday party scene? Where all the birds swoop down and break balloons and knock over tables and whatnot? Did Mr. Pronzini truly not witness the touching scene afterward, in which the hero expresses his concern for the heroine? A scene Hitch desperately tried to excise from the film but couldn't because the camera was in tight on his stars talking, and he had no covering footage? Has Mr. Pronzini honestly forgotten those immortal lines?

MITCH: Look, do you have to go back to Annie's?

MELANIE: No, I have my things in the car.

MITCH: Then stay and have something to eat before you start back. I'd feel a lot better.

I rest my case.

Mr. Pronzini asked me to write this introduction only because he knew samples of my work *should* have been included in this book and *weren't*. As simple as that. I am properly insulted.

So I'll leave now.

—Ed McBain (Evan Hunter)

While *Gun in Cheek* attempted a more-or-less standard book format, *Son of Gun* has the 'Alternative Hall of Fame,' which has a separate entry for each book honored with admission. This makes the chapters less unwieldy and easier to read aloud. (And I definitely recommend you read this one aloud; hysteria shared is hysteria tripled, after all.) Another, more minor improvement comes in the chapters themselves, which are grouped around topics more compelling than in *Gun in Cheek*. You don't need to be a mystery fan to appreciate *Son of Gun in Cheek*; the average mystery reader will not