

People & Places

Books

'Slough House' soon

'Slow Horses' are spies for our times

LONDON, Feb 8, (AP): Like a spy in the night, writer **Mick Herron**'s success has been stealthy. It took a while for the world to catch up with him.

A decade after he introduced a crew of flawed secret agents caught between sinister plotters and cynical spymasters in the novel "Slow Horses," Herron is a best-selling, award-winning writer who has been called the heir to master of espionage John le Carré.

A seventh novel in his spy series, "Slough House," is out this week, and a TV adaptation is in production with an A-list cast led by Gary Oldman.

But initially, few took notice.

"Maybe it just wasn't the right time," the soft-spoken Herron recalled recently.



Herron

"There were voices in my publishing company at the time that were saying the politics of the book were pretty ridiculous because it's all about the far right and references to (Britain) possibly leaving the European Union."

Herron's original British publisher declined a second book, but Soho Press in the United States stuck by him, and UK publisher John Murray

later championed the novels.

After a decade that saw Brexit roil Britain and populism surge around the globe, Herron's fictional world of damaged secret agents, self-serving politicians and buck-passing bureaucrats seems to capture 21st-century anxieties much as le Carré's morally ambiguous tales caught the spirit of the Cold War.

Herron's spies have all been banished from MI5 headquarters to do dull work in a drab London office building - Slough (rhymes with cow) House - for career-wrecking mistakes. This band of "slow horses" is presided over by Jackson Lamb, a flatulent, chain-smoking former field agent who alternates between lethargy, insults and flashes of ruthless brilliance.

Herron's spies bicker in the office kitchen and worry about money - a mundane existence periodically interrupted by traumatic events.

It was one such trauma that Herron says "made me want to write about larger events." He was working as a copy editor in London when suicide bombers killed 52 commuters on the city's transit system on July 7, 2005.

Victims

"I realized that to be involved, in however small a way, in something like that, all you had to do is be a citizen, a member of a city," 58-year-old Herron told The Associated Press from his home in the university city of Oxford. "We're all, I don't want to say combatants, but we're all potential victims."

"The idea of a terrorist event as an intrusion on ordinary life, on everyday life, that became something I wanted to write about."

At the time Herron was writing a detective series, but found spies better suited his desire for "state of the world" novels.

Juliet Grames, Herron's American editor, calls his books "smart, sophisticated takes on real-world problems, but with sly humor that cuts through the darkness."

Violence, usually senseless, often erupts in Herron's books, but it's offset by a large dose of mordant wit. His cleverly plotted page-turners are driven by dialogue that bristles with one-liners.

Much of the humor comes from Herron's sharp eye for the way bureaucracies, whether corporate or clandestine, function and malfunction. The world of Slough House is closer to "The Office" than to 007.

"I have no experience of the covert world," Herron said. "But I have worked in offices. And I've worked for a company that ended up being part of a much bigger company. And what I've noticed is that the larger an organization gets, the more dysfunctional it becomes."

"I wanted to show a world where bad things happen because people make errors. And that's the basis of the series, because all the people in Slough House have made errors of one sort or another. But also it just seems to me it's how the world works."

"Slough House" was written before the coronavirus pandemic, but there are plenty of real-world echoes, including references to Brexit and the 2018 nerve-agent poisoning of a former Russian spy in the English city of Salisbury.

Character

Then there is the rumpled, unscrupulous, bicycle-riding British politician Peter Judd, a character Herron insists "was never specifically intended to reflect" Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

"He was intended to reflect a particular kind of privileged, self-seeking, self-interested, ambitious, untrustworthy, unprincipled politician," said Herron, who attended Oxford University's Balliol College at the same time as the current prime minister. "I can see why people do relate that to Boris Johnson."

Herron's damaged but indomitable secret agents include River Cartwright, grandson of a legendary spymaster; dependable recovering alcoholic Catherine Standish; socially inept computer wizard Roderick Ho; and Shirley Dander, a dynamo fueled by rage and cocaine.

Herron says he is fond of them all, but he has no qualms about killing off long-standing characters. It helps to keep readers on edge.

Herron is grateful for his loyal readers, though he is slightly alarmed by how much some embrace the misanthropic Lamb and his repertoire of luridly offensive put-downs.

"Some people have assumed that because I created this character who does take joy in trampling all over barriers of political correctness, that I must be like that, too," he said. "I've had emails from people who've written to me in terms that Lamb himself might use, and my jaw drops."

Now the slow horses are headed for the screen. Herron was a script consultant on the Apple TV series, which stars Oldman as Lamb and Kristin Scott Thomas as slippery MI5 chief Diana "Lady Di" Taverner. Further cast members are still to be announced, and Herron says "there are some names there which people are going to be very impressed by."

By the time it is broadcast, the world may have returned to something like normality. Herron has been working on his next book during lockdown, but he doesn't think it will dwell too much on the experience of the pandemic.

"All the characters in it obviously will have undergone the same experiences we all have, and they'll reference it and behaviors will change a little bit," he said. "But on the whole, I don't want to write a book set in the world that we've just lived through this past year."



The Weeknd performs during halftime of the NFL Super Bowl 55 football game between the Kansas City Chiefs and Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Feb 7, in Tampa, Fla. (AP)

Super Bowl

Sullivan, Church blend beautifully on anthem

The Weeknd bores at halftime

NEW YORK, Feb 8, (AP): His name is The Weeknd but his Super Bowl performance felt like a dreary Monday morning.

The pop star headlined the Super Bowl halftime show, running through his many hits like an Olympic relay track team aiming for the gold. But he wasn't victorious Sunday night — no silver or bronze medals will be handed out here.

The Weeknd kicked off his 14-minute set in his signature red blazer and sunglasses, directing his robotic ensemble and singing "Call Out My Name." His nasally, semi-Michael Jackson-esque vocals shined — especially during "The Hills" and "Earned It" — but the performance felt like it was designed for a typical awards show in the vein of the Billboard Awards or MTV VMAs — not the Super Bowl stage.

Maybe he had restrictions — either creatively, or COVID-ly? Who knows, but overall his performance felt limited and inadequate. Special guests should have been a non-negotiable.

The Weeknd finally came to life — 10 minutes to the performance — when he and dozens of his dancers hit the field to perform the explosive hit "Blinding Lights," giving off flash mob vibes.

He was finally center stage, where he needed to be all night. But it was too late to save the show — most of the singing was done on the sidelines, as if it was an afterthought. Maybe because it was.

Who did impress the world at the Super Bowl? Jazmine Sullivan and Eric Church.

The odd couple proved why they are multiple Grammy-nominated stars in their own right, blending their vocals beautifully to create a memorable, enjoyable rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner" on Sunday.

Church kicked off the performance, strumming his guitar and giving all the feels with his raspy vocals. Sullivan later joined in, her voice also raspy but heavy and rich, belting the lyrics like a veteran singer. They both gained new fans Sunday night.

They finished the song singing

Amanda Gorman, in a first, brings poetry to Super Bowl

NEW YORK, Feb 8, (AP): Amanda Gorman, the 22-year-old poet who stirred America at the inauguration of President Joe Biden last month, again commanded the spotlight on one of the country's biggest stages, the Super Bowl.

Gorman read an original poem Sunday during the pregame festivities in Tampa, Florida. The poem, titled "Chorus of the Captains," was a tribute to three people for their contributions during the pandemic: educator Trimaine Davis, nurse manager Suzie Dorner and Marine veteran James Martin.

Gorman didn't perform on the field but appeared in a taped video message that combined Gorman's reading with images of Davis, Dorner and Martin. Recited Gorman:

"Let us walk with these warriors, Charge on with these champions, And carry forth the call of our captains.

We celebrate them by acting, With courage and compassion, By doing what is right and just. For while we honor them today, It is they who every day honor us."

That Gorman brought poetry to the Super Bowl was an almost unthinkable collision of grace and glitz. But if the Super Bowl, an annual rite of excess, was an unlikely platform for a poet, it showed just

how much Gorman has seized the nation's spotlight since the inauguration.

Gorman, previously the country's first National Youth Poet Laureate, was the youngest person to ever recite a poem at the U.S. presidential inauguration. Her reading of "The Hill We Climb" at the Capitol immediately became a sensation. An illustrated book of her poem quickly zoomed to the top of bestseller lists. Shortly after the inauguration, she signed with IMG Models, an agency that represents supermodels, tennis star Naomi Osaka and playwright Jeremy O. Harris. This week, she covers Time Magazine, in an interview conducted by Michelle Obama.

Gorman's Super Bowl appearance had been planned before the inauguration. She seemed to grasp the unlikelyness of her pre-game reading, the first in Super Bowl history. And with potentially 100 million viewers on the CBS telecast, it made for one very well-attended poetry recital.

"Poetry at the Super Bowl is a feat for art and our country, because it means we're thinking imaginatively about human connection even when we feel siloed," Gorman said Sunday on Twitter. "I'll honor three heroes who exemplify the best of this effort. Here's to them, to poetry and to a Super Bowl like no other."



Actress Christina Ricci attends the Christian Siriano Runway Show during New York Fashion Week on Feb 9, 2019, in New York. Ricci turns 41 on Feb 12. (AP)



Casanova



Pope Francis

Variety

VALHALLA, NY: Rapper Casanova, who is jailed in New York in a gang-related racketeering case, is facing disciplinary charges over a dance challenge video posted on social media.

The 34-year-old rapper, whose legal name is Caswell Senior, will be disciplined by officials at the Westchester County Jail after a woman recorded him accepting the so-called Junebug challenge during a video visit, the Journal News reported.

The challenge asks TikTok users to perform a set of moves in the strangest location they can think of. The woman recorded Casanova dancing in jail and posted it on Instagram, the newspaper reported.

Westchester County Correction Commissioner **Joseph Spano** said correction officials have revoked Casanova's video visitation privileges because recording videos and taking pictures during a virtual visit is prohibited.

"I'm happy to say we don't have a lot of issues with video visits because inmates know it's a privilege, not a right," Spano said.

Casanova faces another charge for not wearing a mask, authorities said. An email seeking comment was sent to Casanova's attorney on Sunday. (AP)

ROME: Pope Francis offered encouragement to musicians who have been silenced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, acknowledging many have lost work and the ability to practice together due to closed concert halls and social distancing norms.

In a video message to a conference on liturgical music organized by the Vatican's culture ministry, Francis recalled the importance of music to the life of the church, citing in particular its prominent role in indigenous Catholic liturgies.

He said he hoped that once the pandemic passes the church's musical life can be reborn "and we can resume singing and playing and enjoying together music and song."

Unlike **Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI**, who is an accomplished pianist and liked to attend classical music concerts in the Vatican, Francis has never showed a

particular passion for musical performance though he is known to be a big fan of the tango and milonga of his native **Argentina**.

Francis ended his message to the

musicians with a question, asking them if the silence imposed on them as a result of the pandemic isn't actually a sign that something new is coming.

"Is the silence we're living in an

emptiness or are we just in a phase of listening?" he asked. "Will (the silence now) let a new song emerge afterward?" (AP)



Eric Church and Jazmine Sullivan perform the national anthem before the NFL Super Bowl 55 football game between the Kansas City Chiefs and Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Feb 7, in Tampa, Fla. (AP)

SAN DIEGO: Paul Grisham's wallet was missing for so long at the bottom of the world he forgot all about it. Fifty-three years later, the 91-year-old San Diego man has the billfold back along with mementos of his 13-month assignment as a Navy meteorologist on **Antarctica** in the 1960s.

"I was just blown away," Grisham told The San Diego Union-Tribune after the wallet was returned on Saturday. "There was a long series of people involved who tracked me down and ran me to ground." The wallet contained his Navy ID card, driver license, a pocket reference card on what to do during atomic, biological and chemical attack, a beer ration punch card, a tax withholding statement and receipts for money orders sent to his wife.

Grisham, who was raised in **Douglas, Arizona**, enlisted in the Navy in 1948. He became a weather technician and then a weather forecaster.

He was assigned to Antarctica as part of "Operation Deep Freeze," which supported civilian scientists, and shipped out to the frozen continent in October 1967. (AP)