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## Mysteries

Moving heaven and earth, keeping your eyes on the pies and getting literary with detective work.

*Reviewed by Maureen Corrigan*  
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### Touch of the Infinite

All mysteries, great and small, allude to it. Call it, with a bow to Raymond Chandler, "The Mystery of the Big Sleep" or, with a bow to Agatha Christie, "Death Comes as the End . . . or Does It?" Attendant upon that ultimate mystery of the existence of an afterlife is a series of vexing metaphysical questions: Is there a God? If so, why does he/she allow Evil to flourish? And, why, as so often happens in detective fiction, do the good die young? The religious roots of mystery fiction sometimes expose themselves above ground, as in G.K. Chesterton's classic Father Brown stories; sometimes they remain buried but vital, as in Dashiell Hammett's immortal *Maltese Falcon*. (Some critics suggest that the falcon really is a feathered stand-in for a dove, which represents the Holy Spirit in traditional Christian iconography.)

But I don't think I've ever read a mystery where theological rumination trumps the thrills of investigation as thoroughly as it does in Mitchell Chefitz's **The Thirty-Third Hour: The Torah of Moshe Katan** (St. Martin's, \$24.95). Chefitz's novel is an odd amalgam of stories from the Kabbalah, Talmudic kibitzing and learned arguments about the tenets of Judaism. For those readers who find the blood and gore, elliptical language and terrible swift justice of the Hebrew Bible as intriguing, in their own fashion, as the street talk and shoot-outs of secular whodunits, *The Thirty-Third Hour* might just be a refreshing excursion into the realm of the Infinite.

Rabbi Arthur Greenberg presides over the largest Liberal Jewish congregation in Miami, one whose faithful members have been implored to contribute to a multi-million-dollar building campaign. But as the novel opens late on a Saturday night, the future of that campaign is in doubt. Brenda Karman, a beautiful convert to Judaism and widow of one of the congregation's most influential members, has come to Greenberg with disturbing accusations. She claims that Moshe Katan, an erstwhile friend of Greenberg's from his seminary days who has been running a series of spiritual workshops for families in the congregation, has done . . . something. (The reader doesn't learn the specifics of Katan's alleged transgression until the end of the novel.)

Because Brenda has vowed to make her charges known to the synagogue's governing board on Monday morning, Greenberg has 33 hours in which to ascertain Katan's guilt or innocence by digging through a mountain of videotapes, transcripts and Brenda's own journals that document his renegade religious classes. Each chapter of the novel centers on a Bible story that Katan ingeniously (and sometimes, in Greenberg's opinion, irreverently) has dissected and interpreted with his eager students.

The great draw of this novel is the way it dramatizes Katan's brilliant teaching of the enigmatic tales of such Old Testament titans as Moses, Daniel, and Abraham and Isaac. Greenberg is torn between outrage at some of the liberties Katan takes in his sermons and enchantment at the heretofore hidden spiritual meaning he has uncovered. To brand Katan a charlatan would inflict grave damage on the families so obviously transformed by his teachings; yet to ignore Brenda's accusations, as well as some of the evidence before the rabbi's own eyes, would be unconscionable. And what would a scandal do to that building campaign? Greenberg will need the wisdom of a Solomon to maneuver his way out of this tight spot.

In one of his fascinating biblical commentaries, this one on the Moses story, Katan tells his

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listeners: "There is a tradition. Under every word of Torah is an angel. When you uncover the secret of that word, you release the angel. . . . She flies before the throne of the Holy One to announce that another secret has been discovered and one more word is in place, one more word in the bridge that connects earth and heaven." At the end of almost every chapter -- and certainly at the surprising end of this odd novel -- Chefitz, too, conjures up the faint rustle of angel's wings as Katan partially unlocks some spiritual mysteries through his lessons. But be forewarned: If you like your mysteries light on digressive talk and heavy on plot, this is not the book for you.

### Olympic Shakeup

In Sarah Andrews's **Fault Line** (St. Martin's, \$23.95), another entry in her popular series featuring forensic geologist Em Hansen, the earth moves -- but not in quite the way Hansen wishes it would. Hansen is asleep in her chaste single bed in Salt Lake City, where she has relocated to be close to her sweetheart, a policeman named Ray Raymond, to whom she's engaged to be engaged. (If only he weren't so immovable on the requirement that she convert to Mormonism, they probably would have married already.) Suddenly, an earthquake intrudes into Em's erotic dreams.

The quake is relatively modest, but it could portend more serious seismic activity for Salt Lake City, which is gearing up (in this novel as in real life) for the Winter Olympics. Television reporters rush to question a prominent state-employed geologist, but the live interview is cut off before she can make a pronouncement about the stability of the new convention center. Later the geologist apparently falls off the precariously perched deck of her home and instantly dies. Em, who's been making ends meet in her new locale by working freelance as an FBI investigator, is assigned to ferret out the facts of the death, as well as the Olympic-sized flaws in Salt Lake City's infrastructure.

The culprits here -- as well as their motives -- are flimsier than the walls of that wobbly convention center. Instead, the most intriguing complexities in *Fault Line* lie within Em's own character: her yearning to be a part of Ray's extended family and her simultaneous fear of its coercive aspects, her dawning awareness that their courtship is doomed and her lapses into denial, her overall painful sense of herself as a woman stranded on the shores of a midlife mistake. Sanctimonious Ray -- and this mediocre mystery plot -- aren't worthy of a great girl like Em.

### Sleuth in Waiting

**Queen of Ambition** (Scribner, \$23), by Fiona Buckley, features yet another fine female sleuth who has bad luck with men. Ursula Blanchard is a lady in Queen Elizabeth I's court. Her first husband died young; her second is in political exile in France, and Ursula is prohibited from joining him until the plague that's raging there subsides. What's a lady in waiting to do to while away her empty hours? Try going undercover, picking locks, decoding cryptograms and risking her neck snooping into the foul hideaways of spies.

The fifth mystery by Buckley to feature secret agent Ursula Blanchard, *Queen of Ambition* is entertaining, vividly detailed and, to a reader (like me) who's only superficially versed in the daily life of the English Renaissance, historically convincing. At the outset, Ursula is summoned to court and given an assignment by her "control," Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's secretary of state. It seems Her Majesty is scheduled to visit Cambridge, where she'll be feted at an outdoor play festival by the students there. Rumor has it, however, that something more deadly will occur at that event than dramatic emoting. Ursula decides to pose as a serving wench and insinuate herself into a bustling pie shop in Cambridge, headquarters of the alleged assassins. There she thumps dough and uses her rudimentary espionage skills to uncover an even more devious plot against the queen and her minions.

*Queen of Ambition* agreeably twists and turns like an Elizabethan court dance, and Ursula -- an ur-feminist freethinker with the moves and survival instincts of an Emma Peel (of "Avengers" fame) -- is an inspired creation.

### The Quoting Detective

This roundup concludes as it began -- with a mystery that so stretches the boundaries of the genre that it deserves its own literary subcategory -- maybe something ungainly like "the philosophic-poetic mystery." James Sallis's Lew Griffin series has distinguished itself by the moodiness of its

New Orleans atmosphere, the jagged elegance of its narrative style and the expansiveness of its anti-hero's literary citations. Who else in crime fiction quotes such relatively dim luminaries as George Gissing and Ambrose Bierce? And who else in crime fiction voices such epiphanies as this: "I seem never to learn that standing still doesn't work. There you are with a smile on your face, *they won't notice me*, and all the while all the things you fear keep moving towards you, their smiles a violent travesty of your own."

Lew Griffin has been, by turns, a policeman, teacher and novelist; in ***Ghost of a Flea*** (Walker, \$23.95), the fifth and most decidedly final novel of the series, he's just a worn-out older man, baffled by the erratic behavior of his adult son, as well as lesser mysteries like the threatening letters received by a friend and a violent assault on a policeman colleague. Dead men don't tell tales, or so the saying goes. But the tale told by this one is extraordinary. •

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