

BOOKS

Peter James is a bestselling crime writer who takes his preparatory fieldwork to alarming limits. By Jenni Frazer

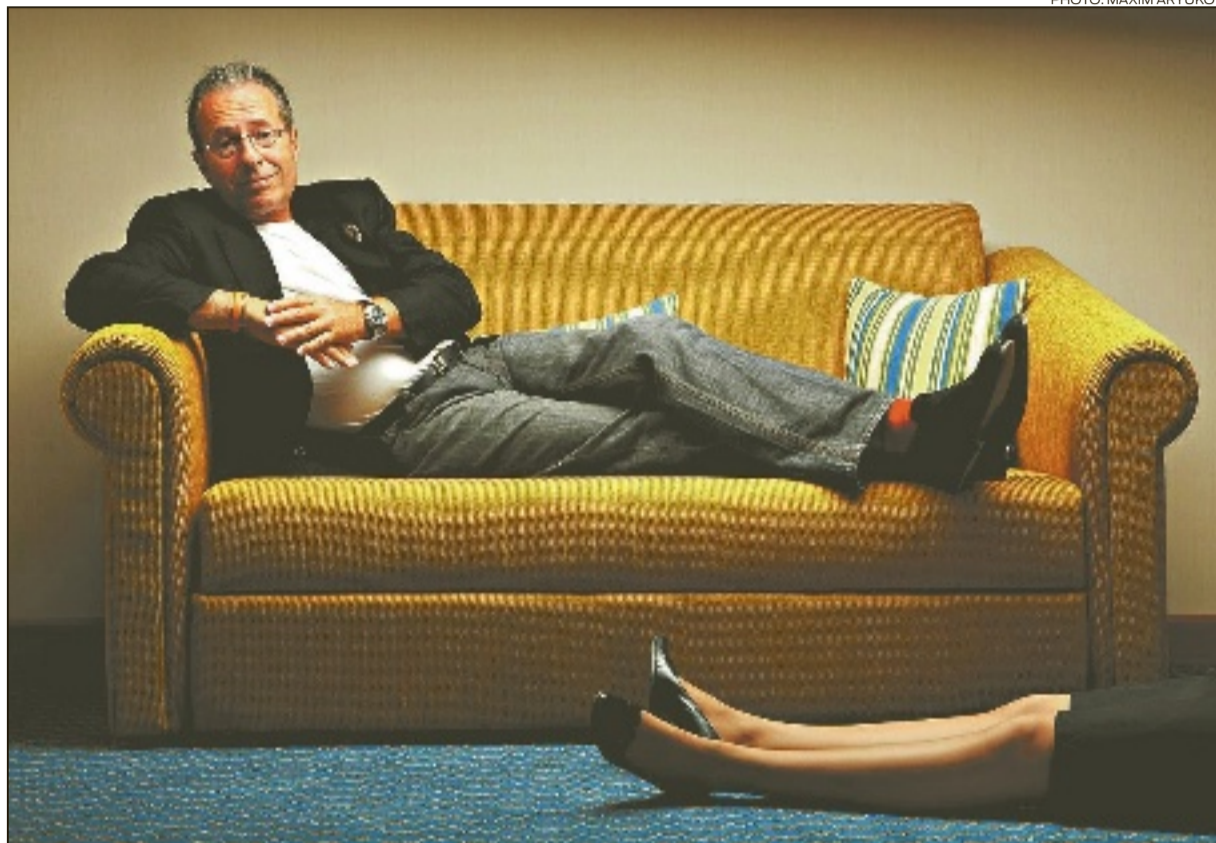
Research? I'm dead serious

INTERVIEW

AS BEFITS a crime writer, Peter James's London flat is a mystery. Try as you might, you will not see a regulation front door, hall or porter. Instead, there is a gate, which gives out mixed signals: might this be the way in, or is it a disused tradesman's entrance? You have to get up close to discover the secret of getting in and, once inside, the unwary visitor has to battle with a lift which would not look out of place in a run-down council block, rather than the bijou apartments it serves.

Since there is a truly horrible scene in his latest book, *Dead Man's Footsteps*, which takes place in a lift, one is entitled to wonder, and the answer comes straight away. "Yes", says James with relish, "I based that scene on that lift, it's awful, isn't it?" He's grinning as he says this and that may well be the secret of his success: he is warm and cheerful and, at 60, retains an almost boyish enthusiasm for his work, which encompasses television, cinema (he was a producer on Al Pacino's *Merchant of Venice*), and the bestselling Roy Grace thrillers.

James's enthusiasm for research can sometimes be perhaps a tad too strong. In his first Roy Grace book, *Dead Simple*, he places one of his protagonists in a stag night that goes horribly wrong when his "friends" put him in a coffin and leave him there. These are scenes that one reads with mounting anxiety but James himself, a self-confessed claustrophobic, says: "I wanted to know... I went to an undertaker and asked not only if they would put me in a coffin, but if they would screw the lid down and leave me there for half-an-hour. And I was going bonkers. I kept thinking: *What if the undertaker drops dead?* No one would know I was in here. But I do like to do the research."



Writer as ladykiller? Peter James at home with a suspiciously horizontal female guest marking out the carpet

James's meticulous research has given him a unique insight for a crime writer. He has a close association with the police, to the extent that he is able to accompany them on their daily rounds. This gives his books an unparalleled authenticity. (And if you ever wondered, the police's most hated cases are "domestics".)

Grace, his fictional detective, based in Brighton (where James himself lives when not in London), is now on his fourth outing and the new book examines what lies at the heart of all crime fiction: questions of identity. Not only does one of his villains reinvent himself, taking advantage of the chaos that resulted from the tragedy of 9/11, but so does the book's slightly dodgy heroine. And James has a surprise for readers who have been wondering, since the first book in the series, quite

what did become of Roy Grace's wife, Sandy.

James, who is currently in discussions to turn the Roy Grace books into a TV series, has a fascinating identity story in his own background. His father, an Anglican chartered accountant, was married to the Queen's glovemaker, Cordelia James, a Jewish refugee from Nazism. As a schoolboy at Charterhouse, James was bewildered to be picked on as Jewish, because he barely knew anything about his mother's background, and it took him a long time to get her to acknowledge the Jewish part of his family.

But for James, being Jewish is a matter for celebration and, he freely acknowledges, it was "a huge advantage" in kicking off his film career in America. His first encounter with the rest of his Jewish family was in To-

ronto, when he was 22. It was, he says, a revelation. He arrived on a Friday night to find a beautifully set Shabbat table and a family who "welcomed me with open arms... They couldn't believe my mother hadn't told me anything."

His background, James says, "has left me deeply interested in prejudice". Although he hasn't yet brought his family's Holocaust survival into his books, he does plan to eventually.

In the meantime, watch out for an entertaining twist in book number five in the Roy Grace series. There will, inevitably, be some dastardly torture, although James, being a warm, friendly Jewish man, admits he even has a soft spot for his villains.

Dead Man's Footsteps by Peter James is published by Macmillan at £16.99

Lost in Hoffman's dark, lonely characters

ILLUMINATIONS

By Eva Hoffman
Harvill Secker, £16.99

REVIEWED BY DAVID HERMAN

EVA HOFFMAN BURST on to the literary scene in 1990 with *Lost in Translation*, her superb account of growing up in post-war Poland and losing her childhood world when she moves with her family to Canada. She has since established her reputation as one of the best writers in English about Jews, Poland and the new Eastern Europe with a number of books including *Exit Into History* (1993), *Shtetl* (1998) and *After Such Knowledge* (2004).

In a memorable moment in *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman describes her parents weighing up whether to emigrate to Canada or Israel. Her mother is worried about her talented daughter's future as a pianist, and writes to the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, "to inquire whether I'll be able to get piano lessons if we come to Israel".

Ben-Gurion writes back, assuring Eva's mother that her daughter will



Eva Hoffman: a disturbing world view

indeed be able to get piano lessons in Israel. A wonderfully personal touch, though it didn't change the family's direction.

Music plays an important part in the book and Hoffman writes movingly about her teachers and her mixed feel-

ings about her musical talent and her departure from Poland.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that her new book, her second novel, is about a woman pianist and her involvement with a man who represents the violent upheavals of the post-Communist Soviet Union, bringing together two of the central preoccupations in her earlier writing.

Isabel Merton, the main character in *Illuminations*, is an accomplished concert pianist touring Europe. She has recently broken up with Peter, her super-rational husband, an American lawyer in New York. She meets Anzor Islikhanov, a dark, tortured Chechen, and they have a passionate affair.

Anzor is everything that Peter is not. Peter embodies law and reason; Anzor comes from a world of violence and unreason. The relationship, too, is a meeting of opposites. She represents art, beauty and innocence and knows nothing of Chechnya and its history of suffering. For her, art and music are what matter.

She is cosmopolitan, without roots in any place or centred family life. He embodies nationalism and the crucial

importance of place and belonging. He rages against what the Russians are doing to his people and is full of anger and contempt for the prosperous western Europeans who look on, oblivious. Two pictures of Europe emerge, one prosperous and civilised but complacent; the other, violent and dangerous.

As she travels, Isabel reflects on her past; her piano teacher, a German refugee; her tragic childhood; and her tormented younger brother, Kolya, a brilliant mathematician.

She is never comfortable. On the outside, Isabel encounters a lawless political world, threatened by terrorism, and there is also "that other lawless realm, the realm of the heart", in which individuals do terrible things to each other. Throughout, there is an abiding sense of loneliness, of lonely people colliding with each other, rather than enjoying a loving family or relationship. This is a dark book, beginning with music and love and ending with a disturbing view of the world.

David Herman is the JC's chief fiction reviewer

CHAPTER & VERSE

BARACK BACKERS

▶ ONE REASON why Barack Obama has been able to mount such a successful nomination campaign might be the resounding backing he has received from various writers. Among them are some of the many star American Jewish authors currently in the literary firmament. The *Huffington Post* website reveals just how much individuals have contributed. According to the *HuffPost*, Nicole Krauss, has given \$1,250 to the Obama coffers, while her husband, Jonathan Safran Foer, has contributed the unlikely sum of \$1,408. Fellow novelist Michael Chabon has pitched in with \$4,600, while Shalom Auslander sent the Big O \$300.

DRAGON DUO

▶ JUST AS the JC and IJCC introduce our version of *Dragon's Den* (see this week's *Business* page), two enterprising Jewish writers are launching their own moneymaking scheme — and it already has the backing of one of the BBC's dragons. Stuart Brodtkin, former editor of the *London Jewish News*, and Laurie Stone, a journalist who works for *The Sun*, have combined to ghost-write the memoirs of stationery and lingerie king Theo Paphitis. Their book, *Enter the Dragon: How I Transformed My Life and You Can Too* (Orion, £18.99), tells how, after being turned down by several potential backers, Paphitis's first big deal was financed by the Israeli Mizrahi Bank.

TITLES IN VIEW

ALLEGRO MA NON TROPPO



Maestros, Masterpieces and Madness, by Norman Lebrecht (Penguin, £8.99) is an enjoyable mélange of matters musical (the alliteration is catching)

including gossip, controversy and informed opinion. Not only is there a top 100, but there is also the "20 worst classical recordings".

A FAMILY SCARRED



Forty-year-old **Katrin Himmler** doesn't have a mere black sheep in her family — more a black-hearted, monstrous wolf. For she is the great-niece of SS head Heinrich

Himmler. She tells her family history in *The Himmler Brothers* (Pan, £7.99). Now living in Berlin, Katrin Himmler is married to an Israeli Jew.

TERKEL TALKIES



Earlier this year in the JC, Peter Moss hailed Studs Terkel's *Touch and Go* as at least the equal best memoir he had read. Now, the New Press has released *The Studs Terkel*

Interviews: Film and Theatre (£9.99). Subjects include Cagney, Brando and Sir Ian McKellen.