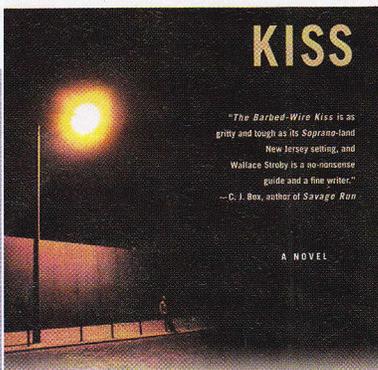




THE
BARBED-WIRE

KISS



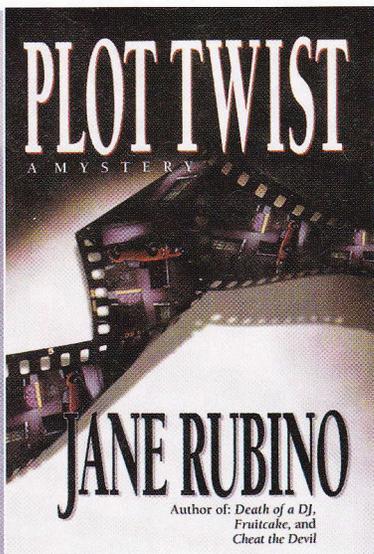
"The Barbed-Wire Kiss is as gritty and tough as its Sopranoland New Jersey setting, and Wallace Stroby is a no-nonsense guide and a fine writer."
—G. J. Oso, author of *Savage Run*

A NOVEL

WALLACE STROBY



PLOT TWIST
A MYSTERY



JANE RUBINO
Author of: *Death of a DJ*,
Fruitcake, and
Cheat the Devil

jersey noir

BY JOEL SAMBERG

If it's true that "the Jersey shore can be murder," that the hydrocarbon level near Trenton is "high enough to etch glass," and that the Newark train station is "as romantic as a pile of hippo dung with head lice," it's also true that Garden State mystery writers have turned New Jersey into one of the prime settings for their novels.

No less true is that these writers enjoy a loyal and ever-growing readership.

Author Harlan Coben, for example, saw his latest book, *No Second Chance* (from which we get the hippo dung description), appear on the coveted *New York Times* Bestseller List for several weeks this summer, triggering a major publicity tour that included his appearance on *The Today Show*. Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum novels (one of which contains our glass-etching analogy) have been read by more than 11 million people, including 3,000 fans who showed up for a single book signing in Trenton last year. And Jane Kelly's popular mysteries, such as *Killing Time in Ocean City* and *Cape Mayhem* (which features the murderous tag line about the Jersey shore), sell well at many regional bookstores, even years after they were first published.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE GARDEN STATE THAT MAKES IT THE SETTING OF CHOICE FOR SO MANY WHODUNITS?

ABOVE: Stroby's debut novel got rave reviews last spring; author Rubino gives lectures on the art of writing mysteries.

To be sure, not all Jersey mystery writers paint unflattering pictures of the Garden State. Some play off the lively cultural diversity of towns like Hoboken and Secaucus, as Jane Isenberg does in her Bel Barrett series, including *Midlife Can Be Murder* and *Out of Hormone's Way*. Even Evanovich, whose novels are set mostly in and around Trenton, has lovingly evoked a shore town boardwalk by referring to the smell of

coconut sunscreen, the endless parade of people and cuisine, and the pleasant sounds of laughter and games.

Still, why a Jersey mystery sub-genre should exist at all is a question almost as compelling as the mystery novels themselves. A simple answer might be that people enjoying writing and reading about the places they've been to and the kind of people they've met. Yet many of the successful New Jersey-based mystery series sell well nationally as well as regionally.

As all mystery lovers know, there are no simple answers.

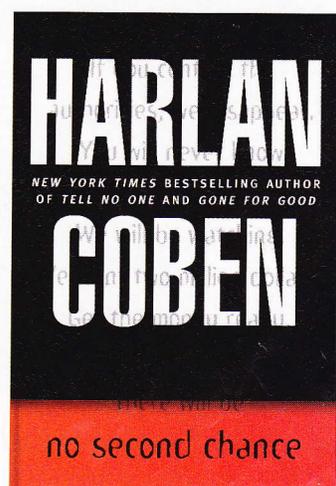
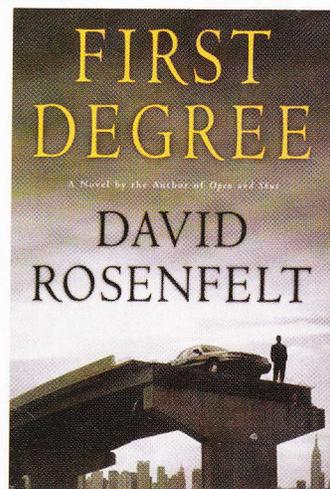
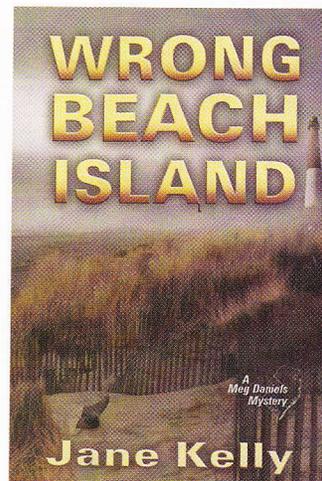
A JERSEY STATE OF MIND

"Jersey mysteries seem to have carved out a niche in book publishing, perhaps because 'Jersey' indicates not only geography, but attitude—whether it's Jersey accent, Jersey shore or Jersey style," says author Jane Rubino. Her series of South Jersey-based mysteries includes *Death of a DJ* and *Plot Twist* as well as the upcoming *Raise the Dead*. "I've traveled a lot throughout the U.S.," she continues, "and the only other state whose name immediately correlates to character is, I think, Texas."

"There is a romance about New Jersey that has to do with the state's [native sons and daughters]—the Sinatras and Springsteens and Cobens and Evanoviches," says Rita Jacobs, a professor of English at Montclair State University. "There is something rough and tumble and no nonsense about the state—no New England niceties get in the way of straight talk in New Jersey. That's a mystery lover's dream."

Mystery authors can also draw on the Garden State's many intriguing locales. "There is no doubt that New Jersey lends itself to mysteries," says Robin Hathaway, author of a new series of mysteries with a heroine named Jo Banks, a young woman doctor who provides medical services to motels in South Jersey and makes house calls on a motorcycle. Hathaway's first book, released this April, is called *Scarecrow*. She enjoys the wide variety of settings from which to choose, "from city to county to seaside," she says. "Then there is that unique setting, the Pine Barrens. Its winding creeks,

RIGHT: Kelly's protagonist, Meg Daniels, has found mystery all along the New Jersey coast; Rosenfelt grew up in Paterson, like his character Andy Carpenter; Coben's latest book was named International Book of the Month.



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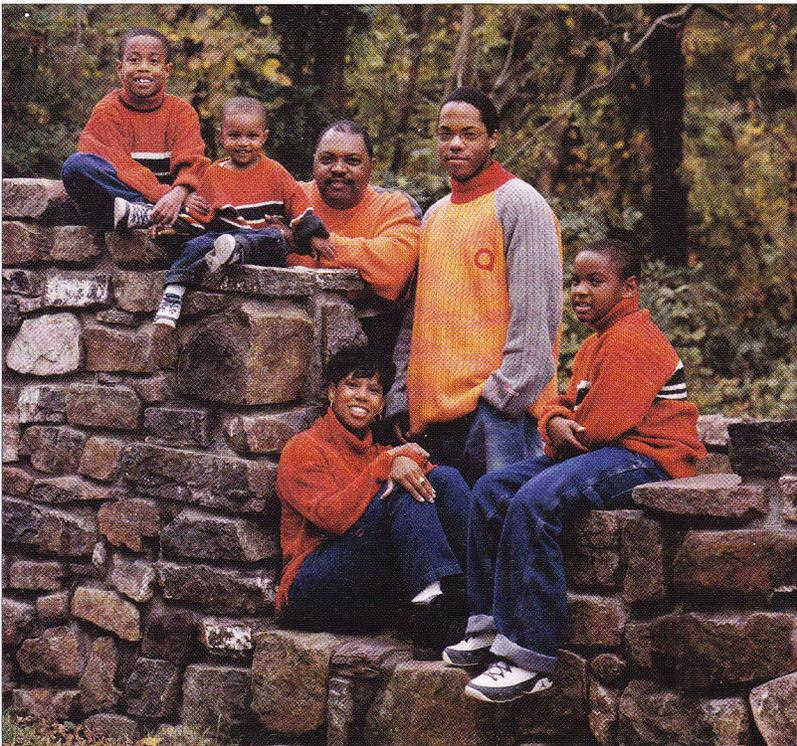


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misty marshes and pre-Revolutionary brick mansions all create a mysterious aura.”

“I base my settings on what I know and what I’ve seen,” says Wallace Stroby, whose debut novel *The Barbed Wire Kiss* received glowing reviews this past spring. One critic described it as “part Sopranos, part Springsteen.”

“I don’t like to disguise [locations] because there’s really no reason to,” explains Stroby, who’s also an editor at *The Star-Ledger*. “You can drive from the beach to a rural area in 20 minutes, from a trailer park to a million-dollar estate in five. Just about anything you can find elsewhere in the country you can find in microcosm in New Jersey, with the possible exception of a desert.”

In any case, adds Hathaway, you don’t have to be from New Jersey to enjoy reading about it. “One of the best things about mysteries is their variety of settings,” she says. “Learning about new places is an extra dividend that mystery readers have come to expect.”

PEOPLE LIKE US

More important than the settings, most authors agree, are the heroes and heroines. “With rare exceptions, I don’t consider the ‘exotic’ Jersey settings to be particularly important,” admits David Rosenfelt, whose well-reviewed debut book last year, *Open and Shut*, follows the exploits of a Paterson defense lawyer who tracks down his father’s murderer. “Nor would the work be dramatically different if the home state were changed.” Rosenfelt’s follow-up Jersey mystery, *First Degree*, came out in June.

“Character, character, character,” says Stroby. “A believable plot is important, but the more character-driven it is, the better off you are. Raymond Chandler is one of the founding fathers of realistic American crime fiction, but who remembers much about his plots, well crafted as they may have been? It’s the character of Philip Marlowe—the world-weary, wisecracking private eye—that endures.”

Stroby lives in Ocean Grove, and

Hathaway has a cottage near the Delaware Bay ("Perfect place to write," she says), but not all Jersey mystery writers live here—although the majority started out that way. Isenberg was born in Paterson, lived in Passaic, resides in Amherst, Massachusetts and is moving to Washington State to be closer to her daughter. "Readers want to know if Bel Barrett is moving, too," she says, "but she's not. She'll stay right there in Hoboken where she belongs."

Evanovich, born and raised in South River, lives in New Hampshire because of her husband's teaching career. Her newest Plum book, *To the Nines*, was released in July and has, in the author's words, "interesting people, family values, political incorrectness, plus some sex and some cussing."

And plenty of New Jersey. "I get a lot of mail from out-of-staters who love reading about Jersey," Evanovich says. "It's amazing how many people have left the state and read the Plum series to get their Jersey fix."

Even noted novelist, screenwriter and New Yorker Richard Price is often regarded as a Jersey mystery writer. Price, author of *The Wanderers* and *The Color of Money*, is currently represented by *Samaritan*, set (as were his previous books *Freedomland* and *Clockers*) in the fictional New Jersey county of Dempsey. In *Samaritan*, a New York TV writer returns to his roots and is mysteriously brutalized in his apartment, prompting a former friend from the Jersey projects in which he grew up to try to solve the crime.

Even when authors like Price disguise the towns and characters, it's clear that they're still relying on actual Jersey locales for their inspiration. That, too, is part of the fun of reading these books: trying to figure out who's who, who's where and what's what.

They are, after all, mysteries. **SL**

Joel Samberg recently completed a multi-city speaking tour on behalf of his recent book, *Reel Jewish: A Century of Jewish Movies* (Jonathan David Publishers).

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