

realize how many authors only pay lip service to the concept. She isn't afraid to put the good under a microscope, as well as the evil. Add to this the writing itself, so lyrical and gorgeous that the term literary fiction is not far off the mark. So where do we shelve Louise Penny? Take your pick.

Among the many pleasures of the Armand Gamache series is the inclusion and often the focus on arts that don't usually have a place in crime novels. Her coterie of characters, the friends and neighbors in the village of Three Pines, include a well-known painter and an award-winning poet. Penny's plots frequently revolve around a painting which is described in detail, and then described again and again as various aspects of the work come to light. She also frequently refers to poems in the local woman's canon and uses lines of poetry to illuminate and enhance the action.

Think, for a moment, about what an amazing feat it is for a crime writer to so beautifully and meaningfully depict works of art. To include fine art in crime detection. To show Chief Inspector Gamache as a well-read and well-rounded polymath, instead of the focused and relentless bloodhound found elsewhere. Instead of the typical damaged, alcoholic, divorced cop, Armand is a loving family man, an excellent boss, and a devoted mentor.

**THE REFUSAL CAMP**

Stories by James R. Benn  
Soho Press; \$26.95

**Rating:** Not rated. Not all stories were read completely.

James R. Benn is an award-winning author of the Billy Boyle series of World War II mysteries. **THE REFUSAL CAMP** is his first published collection of short stories. I can only assume that his reputation ensured their publication. The publication was probably the product of the same reasoning as Elon Musk ruining Twitter and Kanye West ruining his reputation: they are too big to fail and no one had the nerve to stand up and tell them, "It's crap."

This disagreeable mess of short stories are mainly about war. They seem

to be cut from the same cloth as the old boy's adventure stories in ancient pulps, a nasty mixture of O'Henry and Jack London. Ghastly, derivative descriptions, hackneyed dialogue and smug little twist endings. Ugh. The ones that aren't war-related include a terrible ghost story and one single science fiction effort.

The science fiction story, "Glass" is the exception. It's a wonderful tale that was previously published in 2021 in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. It is delightful to read and leaps off the page in a way that the other eight stories fail to do. It's both an homage and a super-hero origin story—if your super-hero is Stephen King. Read it. It's almost worth the price of the volume.

**LOCUST LANE**

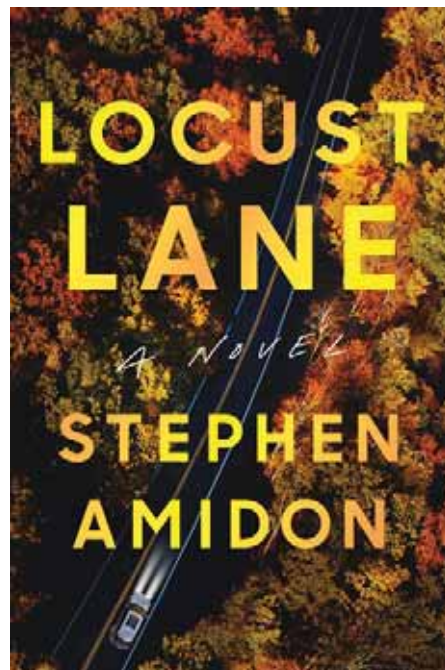
By Stephen Amidon  
Celadon Books; \$26.99

**Rating:** A

**First line:** He hit the dog on Locust.

Stephen Amidon's **LOCUST LANE** is a suburban noir thriller that packs a gut punch. It starts out in Harlan Coben territory but quickly veers into the Harlan Ellison zone.

A girl is killed in a wealthy neighborhood of an upscale Massachusetts



town. She had been partying with three other kids who quickly become suspects. What had fueled the crime? Drinking, drugs, sex? All of the above. Add in a soupçon of bullying, insecurity, self-harm, privilege, religion, race and xenophobia and you've got all the ingredients. Throw in the rich, entitled parents, their lawyers, and a successful restaurateur, and you've got the recipe for a fine noir dish. Simmer as the pace heats up and the tension becomes relentless. Delicious. Chef's kiss.

Let me mention that I don't like place names as book titles. It's lazy and weak. Boo. But I do like an author with the balls to kill (or at least injure) a dog in the first line. Bravo.

**OCEAN STATE**

By Stewart O'Nan  
Atlantic Monthly Press; \$27.00

**Rating:** B-

**First line:** When I was in eighth grade, my sister helped kill another girl.

Stewart O'Nan's **OCEAN STATE** is a deep dive into adolescence. It's well-written and well-paced, but I didn't care for it. Think Megan Abbott on downers. Yikes.

Despite its excellent and provocative first line, **OCEAN STATE** (a terrible, annoying book title, by the way) is a microscopic dissection of teenage angst. It's like an autopsy—you know what's in there but you don't really want to examine every icky, smelly, nasty bit of it.

The book also never lives up to its beginning. You do eventually find out pretty much what happened, but by the time all is revealed, you just don't care anymore. Anyway, round up the usual suspects: economic disparity, puberty, raging hormones, team sports, body dysmorphia, competitive nature, self-doubt, despair, jealousy, broken families, poor role models, genetic flaws. It's all there. Enjoy.

**SINISTER GRAVES**

By Marcie R. Rendon  
Soho Crime; \$27.95

**Rating:** A-

**First line:** Cash sat in a battered