



MURDER & MAYHEM

MARGARET CANNON

The White House Connection, by Jack Higgins, Penguin, 322 pages, \$36.99

Jack Higgins hit it big with his Second World War caper *The Eagle Has Landed*, and continued with a string of mediocre-to-good books notable mostly for good action and settings.

This time out Higgins separates himself from the throng of thriller authors searching for a decent villain, adding an unforgettable main character. From the opening scene, when she blows away a pair of New York City rapists, Lady Helen Lang is a killer with style.

Aside from rapists, Lady Helen's targets are members of a splinter group of Irish terrorists responsible for the torture and death of her only son. These murders clash with British and U.S. policy on Ireland, so a pair of intelligence experts are dispatched to find and halt what they see as a politically motivated rogue.

The book's suspense, the usual ties to persons in high places, is run of the mill. The cat-and-mouse game between Lady Helen and her pursuers is the best of this novel, and it's a testament to Milady's personality that the story holds to the end. This isn't Higgins's best book, but it's a lot better than his most recent four, and a great way to kill a lazy afternoon.

Hunting Down Amanda, by Andrew Klavan, Morrow, 369 pages, \$37

Andrew Klavan has written 12 novels and a screenplay, but he's just been "discovered" thanks to Clint Eastwood's film of his Edgar Award-winning novel *True Crime*.

Hunting Down Amanda isn't award fodder, but it is screen-ready, right down to the adorable child, the vicious villain, the amoral and greedy corporate king and the streetwise hooker. There's also non-stop action with plenty of gore, which doesn't stop until the final page.

The story begins with a horrific scene of destruction in a small, peaceful, U.S. town. It then cuts to New York City and sax-player Lonnie Blake, who can't forget his murdered wife. He encounters a prostitute named Carol, who's on the run. For one night she takes Lonnie back to the life he once had. In the morning she's gone, but Lonnie is desperate to find her and heads into a world where death and torture are just business as usual, and the target is Carol's five-year-old daughter, Amanda.

This is a fast-paced book with good central characters, a couple of decent secondaries, a plot loosely based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and cardboard villains so bad they're not even scary — just jerks. Klavan isn't concerned about motivation or depth of plot, but this will look great on the big screen, and it has a dynamite ending.

The Twelve, by Howard and Susan Kaminsky, St. Martin's, 274 pages, \$34.99

This is another plot that owes its genesis to the Branch Davidian fiasco. We begin with a standoff between the U.S. government and a heavily armed group of religious fanatics. Nick Barrows is the FBI agent charged with negotiating with cult leader Josiah Hummock.

At issue are the cult's children. Over a period of days, Josiah releases 12 strange, religiously obsessed kids to Barrows and child psychologist Dr. Sandy Price. Barrows has a bad feeling about Hummock, one that's at odds with the President's poll numbers and his FBI bosses' ambitions. When Josiah blows up the compound, killing himself and all his followers, it's the end of Barrows' career.

The children are dispatched to disoriented relatives and the case is never until five years later when, mysteriously, the children of Hummock disappear and those responsible for their leader's death start to die. This predictable plot has been used before, but the Kaminskys manage to give it a few new twists. You can skip the slow parts and repetitions of can-it-be-true to get to the good bits.

The Hiawatha, by David Treuer, Picador, 320 pages, \$29.95

Strictly speaking, this isn't a crime novel, although it begins with a criminal's release from prison and there are deaths aplenty as the story unfolds.

The setting is the Native American enclave in Minneapolis, and the fractured family of a man called Simon, who committed a terrible crime. Simon is out of prison, returned to his home but not his roots. In his memories, there's a different life, but the path for Simon is laced with destruction and confusion for those closest to him.

Treuer, who grew up on an Ojibwa reservation in northern Minnesota, is a great storyteller. This is a slow-moving and intense novel that lets the past unfold as the present crashes in. Don't rush this one, savour it.

- FREE-FOR-ALL**
The Struggle for Dominance on the Digital Frontier
By Matthew Fraser
Stoddart, 318 pages, \$32.95
- THE INTERNET CHALLENGE TO TELEVISION**
By Bruce M. Owen
Harvard University Press, 372 pages, \$46.50
- DIGITAL McLUHAN**
A Guide to the Information Millennium
By Paul Levinson
Routledge, 226 pages, \$40

REVIEWED BY SHARON AIRHEART

A few years ago, Ray Smith, then CEO of Bell Atlantic, confidently predicted that we would soon be answering our televisions and watching our telephones.

He was poised to merge Bell Atlantic, the largest of the "baby Bells" created at the break-up of AT & T, with Tele-Communications Inc. (TCI), John Malone's Colorado-based cable television giant. The \$33-billion merger would create a company with wires into the homes of 40 per cent of the U.S. population. No stranger to hyperbole himself, Malone had, the year before, revitalized the cable industry with his prediction of a "500-channel universe."

Ultimately, Malone was a disappointed suitor. Smith called off the merger the day after the U.S. Federal Communications Commission ordered cable companies to roll back their rates for the second time in six months.

Six years later, we limp along with 50 or so channels, we don't answer our televisions and — some would say mercifully — we don't watch each other over the telephone.

It was, in more ways than one, just a pipe dream. But as Matthew Fraser, who tells this story in *Free-for-All: The Struggle for Dominance on the Digital Frontier*, makes clear, it is not that technology failed to deliver on its promise. Rather, communications infrastructure industries, our information pipelines, were in crisis, leading them to make promises that couldn't be kept. Eager for new visions of their own, governments in both the United States and Canada made champions of desperate opportunists facing a revolution in communications. Cable companies, with their high debt-to-equity ratios, were threatened by satellite TV. Television networks looked out at audience shares gutted by the cable channels. Telephone companies, once barred in both Canada and the United States from offering cable services, were playing catch-up as new policies favouring "convergence" finally opened the field. The players took visionary postures while struggling to seize control of the so-called information highway.

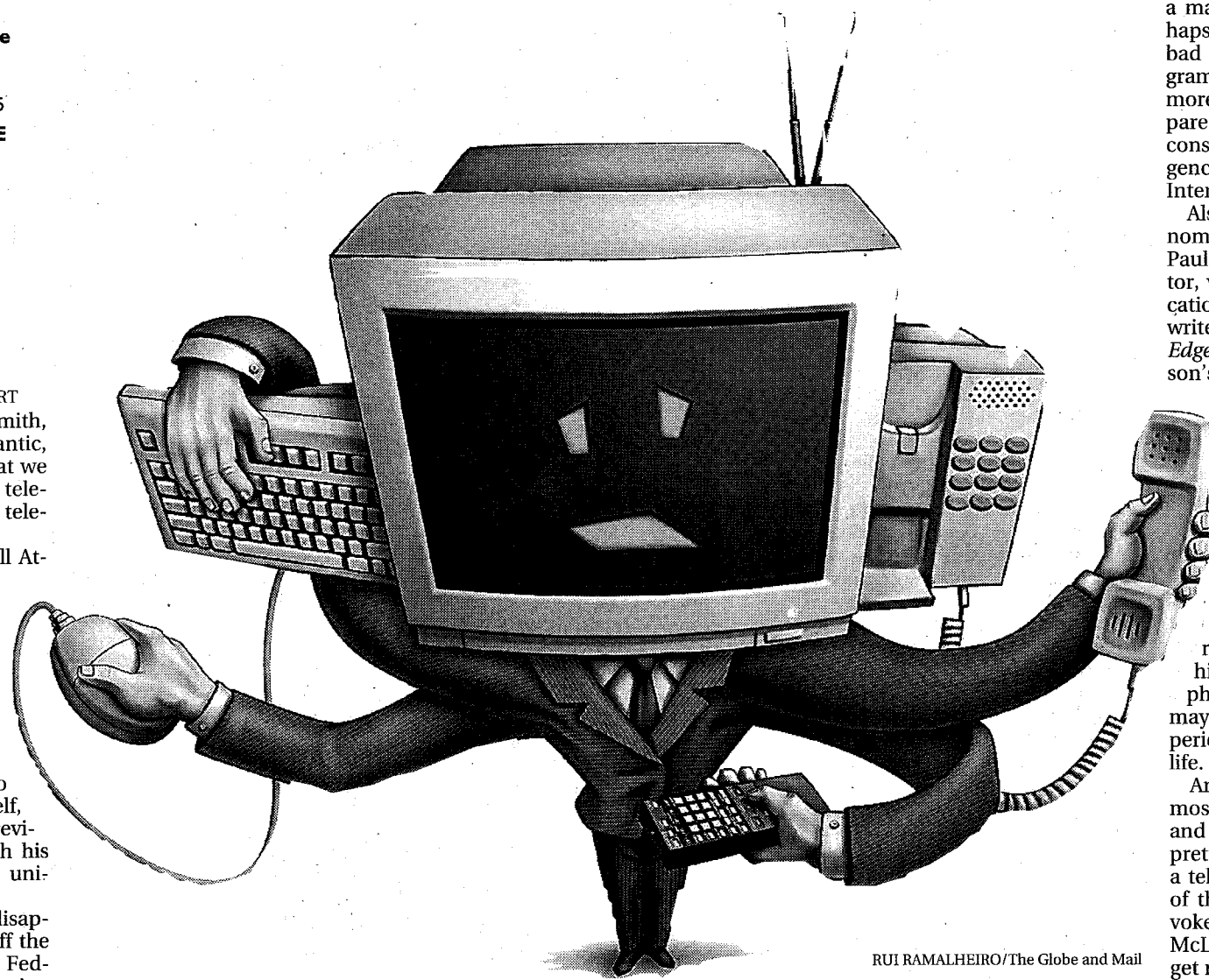
Fraser, a professor at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic University, says: "In the free-for-all race to cash in on the communications revolution, technological promise and public expectations were frustrated by ambition, greed, paranoia, opportunism and muddle. In short, human folly."

Free-for-All deftly shows us the Canadian and U.S. face of that "folly" — Smith, Malone, Ted Rogers, Ted Turner, Al Gore, Keith Spicer, Bill Gates, Steve Case. With the storytelling skills of a mystery novelist, Fraser introduces us to these colourful characters and exposes the path from the first U.S. cable system in 1948 — designed to bring television to the residents of Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, deprived by the Poconos from receiving over-the-air television — to the current "wait-and-see" situation surrounding the much-hyped "high definition TV."

But while broadcasters hope HDTV will put television networks on the same playing field as cable, computer and telephone industries, another force has quietly hijacked the information highway. "In the end... it wasn't the cable barons or the telephone monopolies who put in place the digital infrastructure of the Information Age. The electronic highways of the future were being built elsewhere on the World Wide Web. The explosion of the Web has had a profound impact on the media and entertainment industries and the old players in the cable, telephone, movie, music and publishing industries are now frantically racing to catch up."

The Internet — Fraser styles it "the Book of Apocalypse" in the communications revolution — has "turned all existing paradigms upside down." In the old world, "smart" networks fed "dumb" terminals in your home, your television and telephone. In the new world, the Internet is a dumb network that connects smart terminals. Smart networks, having limited capacities, had to be regulated. The Internet has, theoretically, unlimited capacity. Smart networks are geographically defined assets. The Internet is non-territorial. Traditional network systems, Fraser explains, have been closed, controlled and regulated. The Internet is an open-architecture system that defies control and

Who's winning the Internet wars?



RUI RAMALHEIRO/The Globe and Mail

RECENT RELATED READING

Net Benefit: Guaranteed Electronic Markets: The Ultimate Potential of Online Trade, by Wingham Rowan, St. Martin's, 240 pages, \$52. Rowan, the host of Britain's long-running TV series *cyber.cafe*, has been researching the use of electronic markets all through the 1990s. Here he examines where such markets could go if they were underpinned and guaranteed by governments. This visionary book uses global currency trading as an example, and posits marketplaces in which people could trade work, accommodations, transport and countless other transactions.

Cracking the Gender Code: Who Rules the Wired World?, by Melanie Stewart Millar, Second Story, 229 pages, \$19.95. It is often said that equality will rule in the wired world. Stewart Millar, a Canadian scholar and frequent speaker on digital issues, examines the articles and images of Wired magazine in detail to investigate the ways traditional forms of sexism and racism are being transferred into the digital world, eroding the gains of feminism.

Wired Life: Who are We in the Digital Age?, by Charles Jonscher, Bantam, 294 pages, \$27.95. Jonscher is a British academic who these days splits his time between London, where he runs the invest-

ment firm Central Europe Trust Co., and Harvard, where he works with the university's Program on Information Resources Policy. In *Wired Life*, he takes issue with those who say that the deep-seated effects of the technological revolution are inevitable and even desirable, pointing out (among other things) that the best information processing device on the planet always has been and will long continue to be the human brain.

The Sun, the Genome and the Internet: Tools of Scientific Revolutions, by Freeman J. Dyson, New York Public Library/Oxford, 124 pages, \$32.95. U.S. physicist and writer Dyson (*Disturbing the Universe, Infinite in All Directions, Weapons and Hope*, etc.) argues that technological changes have always altered humankind's ethical and social arrangements, and that such new technologies as genetic engineering and worldwide communication have the potential to create a more equal distribution of the world's wealth. This is a discourse on the ethical uses of science and a reinterpretation of the scientific process, as well as a challenge to use these new technologies to narrow, rather than widen, the gap between rich and poor.

facilitates pluralism. Perhaps that is why it is so popular. In 1998, more than 100 million people around the world surfed the Web. It is predicted that four million Canadian households — fully half the penetration of cable television — will be online by the time we toast the new millennium. Scarcely a decade after the Web emerged, a billion people will be online.

Fraser brings home how quickly the Web has become pervasive and powerful. It took radio 40 years to reach 50 million households. It took television 13 years. The Web reached the same number of households in four years. That penetration has shifted consumer habits. While newspapers have suffered least with the advent of the Web — 11 per cent of Americans reported they read fewer newspapers as a result of being online — television has suffered most; 78 per cent of those surveyed report they spend less time watching television due to time spent on the Internet. Rob Glaser, who brought radio to the Internet with RealAudio technol-

ogy, predicts that people will routinely spend 10 to 15 hours a week "experiencing audiovisual information" over the Internet. Fraser predicts that, although broadcast, cable and satellite television will continue to exist, the underlying consumer mechanism for delivering choice will be Internet-based. "There is no competition."

Fraser's sure hand falters only when he considers the future of the Internet. Asking, in essence, what the Internet will be when it grows up, he briefly speculates as to whether it will be a home movie theatre or a telephone or a television or all of the above.

With a mere nod to media guru Nicholas Negroponte's vision of human-computer interfacing, Fraser attempts to confine the future of the Internet and its World Wide Web to the paradigms of "old media." Those of us already frustrated by having too many different devices performing communications at much-too-slow speeds would have preferred a little more discourse on the Negroponte no-

of how we got here from there than a manual for accountants. Or perhaps, more fairly, a probably not-bad primer, complete with diagrams, charts, tables, a glossary and more, for those who wish to compare television and the Internet, consider the possibilities of convergence while expecting to find the Internet so far lacking.

Also examining the digital phenomenon is *Digital McLuhan*, by Paul Levinson, an Internet educator, visiting professor of communications at Fordham University and writer of both non-fiction (*The Soft Edge*) and science fiction. Levinson's dual purpose here is to present the ideas of Marshall McLuhan about the media and their impact on our lives, and to offer his own ideas about how McLuhan's ideas can help us make sense of the digital age. If you choose to read this book, you will come away knowing that Levinson knew McLuhan, walked with him, rode in cars with him, ate with him, talked to him on the telephone and that this relationship may have been the *sine qua non* experience of Levinson's intellectual life.

And why not? McLuhan interests most media theorists, most writers and media types, including me and pretty well everyone else who owns a television set. To paraphrase one of the scores of Web sites that invoke McLuhan, I personally owe McLuhan a great intellectual debt. I get most of my best ideas by misinterpreting his theories. That being said, *Digital McLuhan* drove me to the dictionary to try to work out whether the word "sycophantic" can legitimately be applied when the object is dead.

Millions of words have been written about McLuhan. Lest we forget, the man himself wrote dozens of books. You don't have to just read about McLuhan. You can actually read McLuhan. Acolytes report a "revival" of interest in McLuhan's theories, mainly because, although he died in 1980, he is seen by some as the patron saint of the digital age. That may be because of his penchant for, as Levinson correctly reminds us, "exploration over explanation, for demonstration via metaphor rather than logical argument, and his presentation of ideas about media in small packets, often as few as several paragraphs." This is, after all, the way content on the most important phenomenon of the digital age, the Web, works best.

Or it may just be because, having tired of the introspective nature of the last half of this century, in which all we talked about was what was going on inside our own heads, we're all now much more interested in the latest intellectual fad: the media. Good-bye Freud and Jung, hello McLuhan and Innis. *Digital McLuhan* isn't rigorous or balanced. On the other hand, it isn't boring or overly dense, things you cannot say about a lot of books about media theory.

Sharon Airhart is a Toronto-based writer specializing in technology.

Related Web Sites

- TCI:**
<http://www.tci.com/>
- Matthew Fraser:**
<http://www.rc.ryerson.ca/ta/fraser.htm>
- CRTC:**
<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/>
- Canada's Information Highway Advisory Council:**
<http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/SSG/ib01015e.html>
- McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, University of Toronto:**
<http://www.mcluhan.utoronto.ca/>
- MIT (Nicholas Negroponte):**
<http://www.media.mit.edu/>

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