

The works of John Creasey

by Michael A Black

A look at one of Britain's most popular mystery writers

Michael A Black is an American crime writer and long-time fan of John Creasey.

I was first introduced to the novels of John Creasey back in high school. My father, who always seemed to have a book in his hand on his days off, pushed over a copy of *A Knife for the Toff* (1951) and suggested that I might like it. After glancing at the painted cover, which featured a man, a woman, and an exploding submarine, I decided that I might as well give it a try. The book, which dealt with gentleman adventurer Richard Rollison, aka the Toff, proved to be the lure on the hook for me. I read the book quickly and found it fast paced and adventurous.

With the thirst for more Creasey, I went down to the neighbourhood drug store and was delighted to find more than just a few his books. I grabbed several in the Toff series, as well as a couple about a character called the Baron. They were all well-plotted and had a smooth, readable style. After finishing these, I searched for more of Creasey, and found him in abundance. On the back of the books it advertised him as the most prolific author in the world. It wasn't until years later that I discovered just how prolific the man actually was.

John Creasey was born in Southfields, Surrey, England in 1908, the seventh of nine children of a poor coachmaker. Afflicted with polio in his childhood, Creasey had to re-learn to walk at age six. He credited a school



Above: John Creasey (1908-1973).

teacher for getting him started writing by encouraging the ten-year-old Creasey to pen a story. It seems that he never quit. Creasey supported himself by working various jobs during the day and wrote at night. During this period it was estimated that he had at least twenty-eight different jobs and moved quite frequently. This was due in part to the late hours he kept while writing. Apparently neither his employers nor his neighbours appreciated his nocturnal devotion to his craft. The book publishers were also slow to see his potential, and Creasey received over 700 rejections slips before his first novel was published.

His first story was published in 1925 and his first book in 1932. The novel, a spy thriller called

Seven Times Seven, introduced Department Z, which dealt with a fictional branch of British Intelligence. From that point until 1942 Creasey turned out two Department Z books a year. He then began three new series including Dr. Palfrey, whose adventures expanded into the realm of mystery-science fiction. Creasey's sales were good enough for him to begin writing full time by the mid-1930's, and he regularly produced seven to fourteen novels a year. To explain his gruelling pace Creasey once said that the only way to make a living by writing was to publish more than two books per year. But since publishers were hesitant to release more than that by the same author in twelve months time, Creasey began using pen names. He also said that the pseudonyms allowed him to write in 'different tones.'

Among his early pen names were Peter Manton, Norman Deane, J.J. Marris, and twenty-five others. Creasey even wrote westerns under the names of Tex Riley and Ken Ranger. He was the only Brit ever to be inducted into the Western Writers of America. [*However, the western could hardly be described as Creasey's genre – on one memorable occasion he confused coyotes with vultures and depicted them flying!* – Ed.]

Creasey was first published in the United States as Anthony Morton. The book, *The Man in the Blue Mask**, (1937. UK title *Meet the Baron*) began the series about a former jewel thief turned art dealer known as the Baron.

**Meet the Baron was the winning entry in a competition to find the modern day answer to E W Hornung's A J Raffles held by the publishers George G. Harrap and J. B. Lippincott. Winning this competition, and the publication of the book thereafter, was one step in the building of Creasey's phenomenal popularity – Ed.*



Above: The distinctive Toff symbol became an important trade mark for John Creasey. He even had it put on his Rolls Royce!

This character was later made into a TV series starring Steve Forest in the title role. While the Baron books were popular in England, they didn't sell well initially in the United States. Creasey attributed this to what he described as the difference between British and American readers. 'Americans,' he said, 'like to identify with the heroes of thrillers, while the British like their heroes presented at a distance.'

Another of Creasey's successful series dealt with 'the Honourable' Richard Rollison, the Toff, and his manservant Jolly. The Toff, which is London slang for aristocrat, was sort of a mix of Philip Marlowe and James Bond. Rollison was a gentlemanly private eye who generally got involved in some

action-packed adventures. Many of his early Toff books were published in the United States under the name of Gordon Ashe, and the series had over forty entries.

Creasey also had several police procedural series that he wrote regularly. He held the police profession in very high regard and portrayed it that way in his books about the handsome inspector from Scotland Yard, Roger West. Perhaps stung by some criticism that the character of West seemed almost too good to be true, Creasey added more foibles to the character of Inspector George Gideon. This series, written primarily under the name of J.J. Marric, portrayed police work in a more seamy light. Gideon, unlike the enviable West, would tend to screw up his investigations by bad decisions and blunders. Creasey would also have Gideon dealing with several concurrent investigations, avoiding the common mistake of some police procedurals in which the protagonist devotes all his

time to just one case. In 1962 *Gideon's Fire*, which dealt with such themes as rape, embezzlement, murder, and pyromania, won Creasey the Edgar award from the Mystery Writers of America for the best crime novel published in the U.S. in 1961. Anthony Boucher was quoted as saying that J.J. Marric was 'far and away the best writer of all the Creasey names.'

Creasey admitted that he modelled the character of Gideon after his real life police friend, Commander George Hatherill of Scotland Yard. Hatherill apparently helped Creasey with many aspects of police work, but after he had an idea the tireless author was able to write a book in six days. During the 50's Creasey also edited a magazine called *Creasey's Mystery Magazine*. He was also the first Englishman to be elected as a board member of the Mystery Writer's of America.

Although his childhood bout with polio disqualified him for military service, Creasey helped organise

defence groups during World War II, and worked with many charities following the war to aid the handicapped, the mentally retarded, and war refugees. He also failed in an attempt to get elected to Parliament as a member of the Liberal party in 1950.

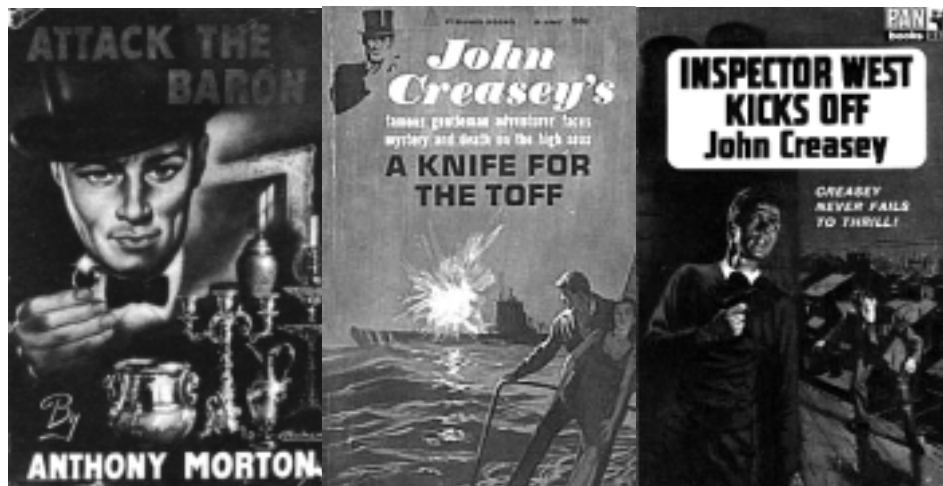
Although he was dismissed by the critics of his time as 'a mystery novel factory' and writer of little consequence, Creasey always made sure that his plots were interesting and well paced. He held himself to a strict writing regimen of 6000 words per day, and usually had 15 to 16 manuscripts in various stages of completion at all times. Creasey would block these plot outlines out in long hand on square-ruled paper. He dismissed writer's block as 'just plain laziness,' and insisted that he had no 'formula' for plotting out his stories. 'My characters are real people to me,' he was once quoted as saying. 'I talk to them, I feel with them, I worry with them.'

Creasey had two sons, both of whom

he described as 'better educated' than he was. He often expressed the hope that they would continue writing under the Creasey name. At the time of his death in 1973 at age 64, he had a stockpile of unpublished novels that continued to be published for several years after his death. He was credited with having written 560 books during his long career. To his lasting credit, Creasey always delivered a good yarn, and never sold the loyalty of his readers short. It was said that during his writing career, the only thing that would make him interrupt his strict writing regimen was a letter from a fan.

Although his books are no longer in most conventional bookstores, the Toff, the Baron, and Inspectors Gideon and West can usually be found lurking in the mystery sections of most used bookstores. Do yourself a favour and pick one of them up. After reading it you'll be tempted to do it again... And again... And again.

Below: Attack the Baron (1951), A Knife for the Toff (1951) and Inspector West Kicks Off (1949)



Below: The Touch of Death (1954), Gideon's Fire (1961) and The Black Spiders (1957)

