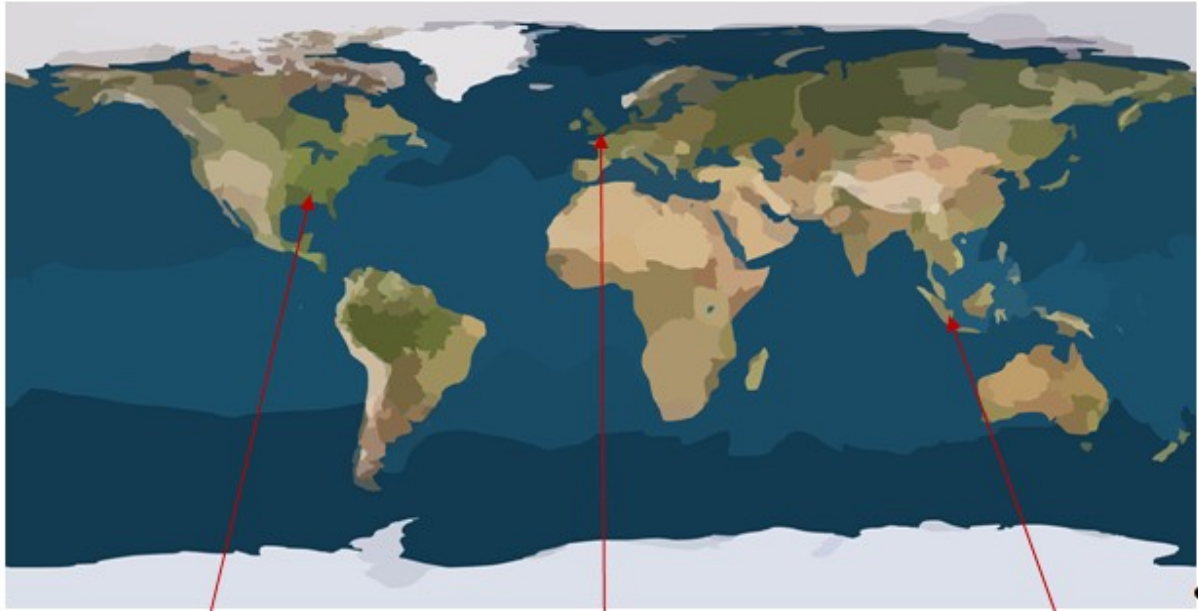


BRYN AND FRIENDS



US Storyteller Tom J Hannon



English Poet Noel Wincote



Malaysian Storyteller S.K. Guna

The free to download e-magazine exclusively available from Bryn's author website <https://brynpetersen.co.uk>, where you can also find details of Bryn's self-published books, future projects, blogs and much more.

Bryn Petersen

Issue date 30th August 2023

BRYN AND FRIENDS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	3
THE MASK.....	5
THE SHED.....	13
I SOLD MY SOUL TO THE DEVIL	14
THE FINAL WORD	17

FOREWORD

Welcome to the new edition of 'Bryn and Friends'.

The little promotional magazine I envisaged for helping Indie Writers, poets and artistic creative friends this issue has gone International!

First, I want to introduce a very special young Malaysian writer and friend, S.K. Guna, who has contributed the first story 'The Mask'. I really love this story, and it is always nice to read something from a genre other than the one(s) you choose to write within yourself. I believe this young man has great talent and potential – so definitely one to watch out for!

Second, I want to welcome the return of the wonderful English Indie Poet Mr Noel Wincote, who has supplied the poem 'The Shed' for this issue. In my opinion, my lovely friend Mr Wincote seriously underestimates his own talent (which I think is a typical writer's trait). I am sure you will love this poem.

The third contributor for this issue is the awesome Mr Tom J. Hannon, who hails from America.

I am so excited to think my little online magazine seems to be growing in popularity! Maybe one day, it will become Global!

Till next time, take care.

BP

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR, S.K. GUNA

S.K. Guna has been dreaming up nightmares since the very young age of five. Although initially procuring academic qualifications in photography and audio production, he opted to pursue writing as a full-time profession upon graduating at the top of his class with a Master's in Writing for Creative and Professional Practice from Middlesex University in London. He currently resides in Selangor, Malaysia, with his four cats, and continues to obsess over the most unimaginable methods of tormenting characters in his works of fiction.

Note from the Author:

If you enjoy this content, please consider supporting my creative process through *Patreon*. Links to my *Patreon* and other social media sites are listed below. I appreciate your support and look forward to engaging with you!

©MAY 2023 *THE MASK* by S.K. Guna
Selangor, Malaysia, 47500

Patreon: patreon.com/SKGuna

Twitter: https://twitter.com/SKGuna_writer

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SKGunaOfficial>

Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/user/SKGuna_writer

Subreddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/Scrinium_Macabre/

Subreddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/SKGuna_writings/

THE MASK



THE HOUR WAS LATE; the sun, a tiny bead of waning glow, lay on the distant horizon.

The encroaching darkness, coupled with the faint tolling of the church bell beyond the town's stone fortifications, gave pause to the rider: curfew had come into effect, and he was now of two minds; turn back and negotiate his way into the relative safety of the settlement behind him, or valiantly press forward in the hopes of reaching his estate unmolested.

Perched idly upon his horse at what would thereabouts be a third of the way between the town of Mardrake and his home, Clayton watched as the final orange hues in the sky metamorphosed into that of a creeping dark, bathing the road and grasslands before him in a tenebrous vista that further perpetuated his indecision.

The newly-officiated Lord of Hornbläum had now realised that he had indeed made a series of grave miscalculations — three, to be specific.

The first was in his obstinacy to forego travelling to Mardrake by means of his estate's horse-drawn carriage.

Ever since he could fasten his boots, Clayton had never truly habituated to the notion of routinely being tended to by his father's servants — a facet he was often expected to indulge in given his noble station — much less be fetched and carried across the lands when he was perfectly capable of being on horseback all by his lonesome self. The young lord valued his independence of mind and body and wore it with such gleeful pride within the confines of the Hornbläum estate, much to the chagrin of his conceited father.

Still, the coachman, Reginald, was right. He was a pious, former sergeant-at-arms who had served Clayton's father well before the young lord was brought into the world. This made Reginald far more adept in manoeuvring and, if the need arose, despatching any impediment

that would otherwise hinder the safe passage of his employer along the old road. However, despite the coachman's repeated pleas to opt for the carriage and subsequent warnings of the ambiguous terrors that stalked the lands after dark, Clayton politely declined, for he believed the concept of being ferried around town much too grandiose and more befitting the likes of his late father's opulent repute, a sentiment he chose not to disclose to Old Reginald.

His second mistake, which could have easily been circumvented the more he ruminated on it, was in declining an audience with the officials from the deed office when they rapped at the Manor doors the day prior.

The choice to turn the men away was not preceded by any form of pretension on his part; Clayton reasoned that he had done so simply because he had no desire to commence and preserve his lordship in the way his late father did — by way of entitled indolence.

He had thought that by taking the initiative to visit the deed office in person, he could, perchance, impress upon the plain folk of Mardrake that, despite his inherent formalities, he was no different than they were.

However, despite his noble intentions, the young lord's appointment at the office did not proceed as seamlessly as he had hoped; rather, it extended beyond what constituted punctual decorum. A simple clerical error proliferated into a true test of patience for Clayton, consuming most of his day, as he was obligated to not only await the rectification, signage and authentication of his documents but also be present for the public dressing-down of the offending employee by his superiors.

A quick study of the highly apologetic scribe led Clayton to surmise that he was patently a new appointee, an observation that was later confirmed by the man's higher-ups, who too expressed deep regret for the mishap as well as their respective condolences on the recent passing of the Elder Lord of Hornbläum — as protocol would dictate.

In truth, the entire affair only made Clayton feel immensely sorry for the lowly clerk, reserving his frustrations instead for those who sought to admonish the man for his novice mistake so openly.

"To err is to be human, gentlemen," the young lord solemnly reminded the man's employers before bidding them a good day and casually walking out of the building. Although he did not linger to see their faces, Clayton could vividly picture the befuddled and astonished looks of the men in charge as they struggled to fathom the young lord's defence of the minuscule clerk, and to that, he smiled contentedly.

The third error on his part, which he still carried a degree of exultation for, can easily be ascribed to *distraction*.

Having left the estate without taking breakfast and only settling his affairs in town by late afternoon, Clayton was famished, and this prompted the young lord to seek out the nearest tavern to quell his empty stomach.

Unsurprisingly, there was nothing remarkable about the food and drink he was served at the establishment; he could barely recall its contents at all, only noting that he had cleaned his plate within minutes.

What did catch his eye and, therefore, became his distraction, was the young tavern maiden that had served him his meal. She had fiery red hair, bunched up into a quick bun at the back of her head, with a rich lock of it that had come loose and hung from the side of her narrow face. Her eyes sparkled an emerald green, and Clayton thought her smile warm and inviting when she placed the forgettable meal in front of him.

"That was a lovely meal," Clayton lied as the young lady retrieved the empty plate and tankard from his table.

"Begging your pardon, sir," she said, shooting him that infectious smile again, "you're probably our first and *only* patron to have remarked so generously about the food."

Clayton could not help but smile back. "Did you make it yourself?"

"Gosh, no!" she answered, attempting and failing to tuck the hanging lock of hair behind her ear, "It's my Da 'who does all the cooking."

"Then please pass him my compliments."

The maiden nodded sheepishly.

"May I ask you your name?"

The young woman's cheeks were flushed. "It's ... Lyla."

"That's a lovely name," Clayton noted, albeit truthfully this time.

Lyla chuckled, her eyes averting his gaze. "Begging your pardon, sir. You seem to find many things *lovely*."

Clayton smirked. "Some more than others."

The tavern maiden went quiet for a moment before clearing her throat. "That's very kind of you to flatter me so."

The young lord chortled.

Lyla leaned in. "If I may," she continued hesitantly and in a hushed voice, "what's your name, sir?"

The young lord leaned forward. "Clayton," he answered softly, teasing.

Her smile widened, and a shy giggle followed. She was but a moment away from speaking — when her words were rudely interrupted.

"Lyla!" a gruff voice bellowed from the kitchen. "There be more plates to be servin'!"

Clayton could see a redness wash over her face. Her father had summoned her into the kitchen, no doubt to preclude her from fraternising with the paying customers.

Lyla flashed an apologetic smile towards the young lord before gesturing towards the kitchen and briskly taking off in that direction.

Left to his own devices, Clayton had found himself smitten with the young maiden called Lyla. It was not merely her outward beauty that enchanted him, for he knew that all roses would eventually wilt given time, but the unassuming sincerity in the manner that she conversed with him swept the young lord's heart.

Clayton recalled the countless soirées his father had hosted prior to his untimely demise, whereby the young lord was relegated to mingling with a bevy of potential suitors from high society, of which there were many, to which he plastered on a strained smile and nodded along to their trivial facades and laughed, always mockingly, at their often insipid jokes and world views, further diminishing the already tenuous approbation he levied towards the aristocracy.

Of the innumerable impeccably dressed women that so very openly threw themselves at him, Clayton would always maintain an icy distance, often eliciting all manner of spats and curses from those loathsome peacocks upon learning that he had so unceremoniously rejected their eager advances.

This petulant and ill behaviour, however foul, never found purchase nor reciprocation of any sort from the young lord. Instead, Clayton often pitied the women, for he saw them as a sorry lot who were forced to contend with the growing realisation that no real face lingered beyond the dolled-up masks that they so objectionably projected.

None could ever hope to eclipse the authenticity of someone like Lyla, for this he knew to be true. Nevertheless, despite knowing that a life with her was nigh impossible to attain given their respective places in society, the young lord took comfort in dreaming of one — and dream he did, spending the better portion of the remaining afternoon observing the young tavern maiden serving customers, wiping down tables, and occasionally, flashing a smile in his direction.

The horse groaned restlessly; Clayton was out of time.

Not intending to delay further, the young lord signalled his steed to begin moving again — back to his estate.

With only the faint moonlight above guiding his way, Clayton gently kicked into his steed's abdomen to pick up its pace; the horse neighed in compliance. Its hooves thundered across the dirt road, galloping with such power and grace.

The stallion, which he called *Nameless*, was a magnificent creature. It bore a majestic black coat, a pure breed large in size and of incomparable elegance. *Nameless* was the only gift from his late father that Clayton genuinely appreciated, for he viewed the animal to be his only true friend in the many years that the young lord lived beneath his father's imposing shadow.

On many an occasion, expressly when the estate was swarming with uninspired guests, Clayton would slip away to the stables, where he would recite poetry or sing soothing songs to his trusted companion. There were nights when the young lord would not return to the house at all, hiding out in the horse barn until the sun would rise, inadvertently causing a great deal of distress among the servants who were tasked with waking him up in the mornings, only to find the master's son absent from his bedchambers.

Clayton did not care much for his father's servants, save for the handful of them he found to be genuinely earnest in their duties around the Estate, like dear Old Reginald. The vast majority were unashamed bootlickers in his eyes, a belligerent poison-spewing species of tattlers that would no sooner damn one of their own to the pyre if it so much as cast the perpetrator in a more propitious light.

In short, the young lord despised his father's lackeys as much as he despised those of whom they so obsequiously served, likening it to a twisted repugnant matrimony between the haves and have-nots that made his skin crawl the more he pictured it, veritably so.

Though he was resigned to the disconcerting verity that he could not rid himself of the pompous bloodsucking vermin that embodied the affluent society in these lands, he was poised that, come morning, a slew of inevitable dismissals would be dispensed across most of the reprobates that served his father, for Clayton was now the new Lord of Hornblaüm.

As the rider left the tranquillity of the steppe, the road now wound its way around a motionless loch before piercing into a blackened grove a ways ahead; he pressed on.

The sight of the thicket's darkened recesses, as it gradually distended until it was all his eyes could see, made his heart jitter.

On the one hand, clearing the old woods meant that Clayton would be mere minutes away from cresting the familiar hill that marked the threshold of his estate and, given his current predicament, doubling as his sanctuary.

On the other hand, the rider was well-aware that the lightless path through the trees was a notorious haunt which drew all manner of unsavoury opportunists, brigands, and, if some of the rumours were to be believed, otherworldly corruptions to its perturbing borders.

It was the latter thought that parched his throat and made him instinctually reach for his dagger's hilt, the weapon of which, up until this point, remained concealed beneath his cloak.

A family heirloom that was more trinket than armament, Clayton knew that its formidability in the face of an incursion leaned more on its merit as being a tool for bargaining rather than bloodletting. Still, should the need arise, the overtly ornate dagger could see itself puncturing the flesh of an assailant — should the ideal momentum be imposed on it.

The rider inhaled and entered the void; his hold on the reigns tightened.

As he passed into the shadowy woods, Clayton confronted two harrowing phenomena: the first, a bitter and resentful chill that ferociously clawed at his exposed face and gloveless hands, a frigid greeting far too cold for that time of year; the second, a peculiar yet brief inverted rush of air that assaulted his ears, heralding an eerie stillness that forthwith blanketed the darkened environment.

The trampling of *Nameless*'s hooves upon the dirt road, combined with the rider's staggered breathing, were the only audible sounds that he could hear; it was as if the ancient trees and vegetation that bordered the path home had so suddenly held their breath all at once — so as to remain hidden — for what purpose the rider could not ascertain.

Faster. Faster, they went — charging through the blackened grove like an inexorable tempest wind.

Clayton's heart pounded against his chest, his eyes darting from side to side. He could feel his courage beginning to wither, the endless dark suffocating his mind and body with a festering malevolence. His limbs trembled, almost to the degree of convulsing, brought forth by the icy climate and burgeoning uncertainty.

Any preconceptions the young lord held against the existence of a God had now diminished entirely, for Clayton found himself silently praying; he prayed for his life; he prayed for deliverance.

Finding comfort in the divine to be in short supply, Clayton shifted his focus onto something more — tangible; Lyla, her fiery red hair; her glistening green eyes; her infectious smile; unassuming yet breathtaking.

As he briefly closed his eyes, the visualisation of the young tavern maiden ultimately became an elixir that pacified his troubled heart and mind; He was now resolute that if he could but see her again, they would court, and no sooner wed, and though their union would undoubtedly be ridiculed by the trifling rabble across the land, they would emerge the victors; they would be happy; the future Lord and Lady of Hornblaüm.

WHACK.

The air was ripped from his lungs. His body crashed to the ground with the heft of a falling oak. He attempted to turn on his side, but his upper torso stung profoundly; he winced and groaned.

Unbeknownst to him, the frantic horse had inadvertently veered off the road, causing the rider to be struck across the chest by the thick bough of a tree.

Reeling from the mighty blow, it took Clayton the better part of ten whole minutes to muster the strength to stand upright. Still dazed, the young lord strove to reorient himself and take in the surroundings, only to find the blackness more constricting than ever before.

"Nameless, he called. "Nameless!"

His words found no purchase; the horse was gone.

"Nameless!" Clayton lumbered forward, though not knowing the direction he was headed. *"Don't you forsake me!"*

He called out his friend's name a dozen times more as he stumbled through the uneven terrain, but still — there was nothing.

The betrayal broke him.

Alone in the dark, he slumped against the nearest tree bark and wept. *"Nameless ... come back."*

Clayton froze; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. "Who ... who goes there?"

Silence.

The young lord jumped to his feet and drew the dagger from its sheath. "Be — be warned; I am armed!"

Silence.

Clayton moved backwards; the blade quivered as he pointed it in all directions. "I ... I am the Lord of Hornblaüm! No harm shall befall me — should you desire a swift meeting with the headsman!"

Silence.

Clayton grappled with the thought of whether to flee or stay. "Here! Take this blade — a fortune's worth of gold it'll fetch! Just leave me unspoiled!"

Pale streaks of moonlight now slowly shone through the cracks in the copse's canopy, allowing Clayton a brief respite to calibrate his bearings.

He hurriedly waded through the dense foliage in the hopes that he might rediscover the old road and make his way home on foot, only to gather that his efforts were futile; a searing dread crept into his mind.

At the far corner of his eye, approximately twenty paces away, a faint shimmer betrayed a visage that made Clayton's blood run cold; he felt compelled to face it.

It possessed no corporeal presence, statically suspended in mid-air, staring back at Clayton with empty eyes.

It began to drift towards him.

Locked in place, the young lord gasped; the dagger slipped from his fingers, hitting the ground with a dull thud.

It whooshed towards him with supernatural speed and halted, hovering right before his face; still, he could not look away.

The demonic wooden mask's mouth cracked and splintered into a wide toothy grin, and the manic sounds of a discordant black symphony crescendoed; his ears and eyes bled.

"Oh, Lyla," he whimpered, unblinking, "forgive me."

THE SHED

There's a shed at the end of my garden
But it isn't a shed at all
It's a place where my childhood started
Two doors propped up the wall

It was our den of youthful illusion
Our castle, our tepee, our fort
But one day our dreams were taken
By two men with means to transport

I came home from school one evening
Found a shed all made out of tin
They'd put up this Anderson shelter
Right where my shed should have 'bin'

Now the function of this here shelter
Which you plant in the earth in a hole
Then you shovel the muckall around it
And turn yourself into a mole

They say it protects you from bombing
But if one of them hits you direct
Then the hole you dug in the first place
Takes on a whole different effect

We buried it deep in the garden
And covered it, in camouflage
We planted a vegetable garden
To look like a normal backyard

It was dark, it was dank, it was smelly
The coldness went right to your bones
But it kept us safe in the air raids
And sheltered from flying unknowns

It's still there today in the garden
Still giving the family support
The grand kid are playing inside it
It's their castle, their tepee, their fort

Noel Wincote

I SOLD MY SOUL TO THE DEVIL

T.J. Hannon ©

“This is bullshit,” I argued after my agent read me the riot act. “The editing changes you suggest are unnecessary. This is a future bestseller, yet you tell me you can’t get my novel published. What happened to your connections with the top publishers in the field?”

“What happened is, you wrote a novel I can’t sell. Publishing companies hesitate to sign unsuccessful authors. Your first two books were a flop, and it didn’t take long before they ended up on the discount rack. You have talent and imagination, but you lack that magic that grabs the reader. I’ve stayed with you because I believe in your abilities, but this is not a marketable story.” She handed me the transcript and a list of negative comments. “Tweak and resubmit. I’ll take another look.”

I skimmed the suggestions, disagreeing with most. For example, killing the main character in the last chapter was not happening. “It’s my story, dammit. I have plans for him in the sequel.”

“Sequel? You haven’t published the book yet and are talking sequel?” She stood from her desk. “If you refuse to take my suggestions, we’re wasting each other’s time. I work on commission. Fifteen percent of nothing won’t pay my bills.” She pointed to the door. “Find another agent.”

I stormed from her office, shouting, “I’d sell my soul to the devil for a publishing contract, but I won’t rewrite my novel.”

The elevator door opened. Inside stood a strange-looking dude, wearing a cape and carrying a pitchfork. I was about to ask if he was attending a costume party when he introduced himself as Satan.

“Did I hear you offer to sell your soul to the devil for a publishing contract?”

“I was just blowing off steam. I didn’t mean it literally.”

“Too bad. Because I can guarantee your book becomes a bestseller, as will all your future work.”

“How can you make that promise?”

His piercing red eyes gazed at me. “I’m the devil. I can do what the hell I please.”

“What’s the catch?”

“The service is free for now. Over the next three years, your books will sell millions of copies, and your name mentioned in the same breath as the masters. From the publication date

of your first book with us, the clock ticks. On the third anniversary, your soul will belong to me.” He removed a document from his cape. “Sign here.”

After reading the contract, I questioned the fine print. “If you want my John Hancock, make one change. I have a wife and two kids at home. The success you promise is tempting, but I must protect my interests. Add an escape clause. Our contract becomes invalid if you don’t take my soul on the anniversary date.”

Two horns grew from his forehead. “The devil doesn’t modify, nor does he forget dates. But, if it makes you more comfortable, I’ll add the ridiculous escape clause. It won’t make a hell of a difference.”

Hell & Back Press called the following day, offering me a publishing contract with which I wouldn’t make any revisions I disagreed with. Within three months, my book flew off the shelves at Barnes & Noble. Amazon sales broke records. Soon after, it appeared on every best-seller list. Two sequels were just as successful, and Hollywood was knocking on my door, interested in negotiating a movie deal.

In Mid-November, I booked a cruise to New Zealand on my first novel’s third anniversary. If Satan came to collect on the contract and take my soul, he had a surprise awaiting him. I had other plans. Satan might not forget dates, but did he know geography?

My wife slept in the cabin while I enjoyed the fresh cool air on the balcony. Satan joined me a minute past midnight. He flashed a devilish grin. “Happy Anniversary.”

“We’re in the middle of the ocean. How did you get on board?”

“I’m the devil. I’m anywhere. It’s November 16. The publishing date of your first successful novel. Did you think you could hide from me? It’s time to collect your soul.”

“Not just yet. Before we complete the deal, follow me to the captain’s quarters. It concerns the escape clause.”

“Stop stalling. You signed the contract. You have no escape.”

“We’ll see about that.”

After finding the captain, I asked, “Is it true we just passed over the International Date Line?”

The captain nodded. “I’m adjusting the ship’s log to reflect the twenty-four-hour gain as we speak. Five minutes ago, the calendar said November 15. At midnight, it became November 17. We skipped a day when we crossed over it.”

Satan’s pupils turned from red to black. “What the hell is the International Date Line?”

“It’s the imaginary line separating two calendar days,” the captain explained. “A traveller heading eastbound subtracts a day, while westbound travellers add a day.”

The devil asked, “What does this mean?”

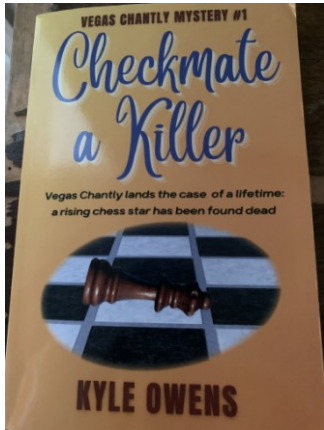
“I hate to tell you this, Satan. You’ve been outdated. The added escape clause says you must collect my soul this November 16th. You’re a day late. I’m free from any contractual commitments.”

Satan’s horns vibrated. He cursed the lord. In a frenzied rage, he leaped over the railing into the cold, dark waters of the Pacific Ocean, sending up a geyser of steam.

The captain reached for a life preserver.

“Don’t bother,” I said. “He’s the devil. Let him go to hell.”

THE FINAL WORD



I want to conclude with just a quick word about this, my current reading material.

It's by a very special Indie writer friend, the very wonderful Kyle Owens, who lives in the Appalachian Mountain region of America.

Kyle has created a truly compelling detective story with a twist. I have never read any detective fiction like it – in a very good way!

The story is delightfully laid-back, laugh out loud funny in a way that transcends the differences between UK English and the American equivalent.

Kyle's style is intimate and confiding without being overly friendly and absorbing with his throw-away nonchalance. I would encourage everyone to give Checkmate a Killer a chance – you won't regret it!

As always, thank you for reading; take care everyone, keep safe and always remember to be kind.

BP

THE END