

# Maiden Mysteries

Nine first-timers vie for the attention of whodunit fans.

BY NATALIE DANFORD

You never forget the first time—or at least Mary Higgins Clark hasn't. *I Heard That Song Before* (S&S, Apr.) may be the prolific writer's 26th suspense novel, but she still remembers the thrill of publishing her first book, *Where Are the Children?*, in 1975. "Two publishers had turned down the book because they were afraid children in jeopardy might upset their women readers," she says. "When I received the call from my agent that Simon & Schuster had bought it, I thought I had died and gone to heaven."

A bestseller right out of the gate is relatively rare, but mystery publishers still need fresh blood, just as they did 30 years ago. "Debuts are in many ways the most important books we publish, whether or not they're our biggest," says Kelley Ragland, executive editor at St. Martin's/Minotaur. "The fact that there are so many new writers coming to the genre each year—and that the market makes room for them—is a clear indication of how the crime novel continues to flourish both artistically and commercially. And of course, as an editor, there's unique joy in finding and nurturing a fresh new voice, one that can both attract new readers to the form and, with its originality, even inject new life into the genre as a whole." Herewith, a few of the season's notable debuts.

**Title:** *The Blue Zone*  
**Publisher:** Morrow, Apr.  
**Author:** Andrew Gross

**First printing:** 200,000

**Plot:** Kate Raab's father is arrested and forced—along with the rest of her family—into the Witness Protection Program, but Kate stays behind. A year later, her father disappears from the program and his case agent is found murdered.

**Author's inspiration:** "I worried that the relevance of the traditional 'procedural' crime novel was under threat from TV's CSIs and *Law & Orders*. Then at a dinner party I met this wildly ostentatious couple—big jewelry, his and her Ferraris, lavish travel—and not long after I found out the husband had been arrested by the FBI for money laundering. I had the kind of story I'd wanted: one that would touch people I know, and that I could wrap a tale of crime and suspense around."

**Clues for Success:** David Highfill, executive editor, says, "Andrew has one of the more unique writing apprenticeships I've ever heard of: he's co-authored five number-one bestsellers with one of the most popular thriller writers ever, James Patterson." Naturally, Patterson's career serves as a model for launching Gross's.

**Body count:** 13  
**Hollywood pitch:** *Alias* meets *The Departed*

