

Highdown Prison decided that Stephen Leather's *Cold Kill* was a flawed but entertaining fast-paced action thriller. **Harriet Dennys** reports



Views to a kill

Cold Kill, the third thriller in Stephen Leather's series about an undercover cop named Dan "Spider" Shepherd, got a mixed reception at Highdown Prison. Some readers felt that the book was an unputdownable, thrilling read, and one they devoured, cover to cover, in one sitting; others felt that it was rather formulaic, with one-dimensional characters and clichéd use of language.

The book, which opens with a terror cell being swept away by the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, draws heavily on contemporary politics for both plot and setting. Leather's post-9/11 landscape contains bogus asylum seekers harbouring terrorists in their midst, CIA operatives torturing suspected terrorists, and even exploding bombs on the London Underground.

This stark grounding in reality sat uneasily with some members of the group, who would have preferred the thriller to have been set in a more fictional, removed world. "Some readers felt uncomfortable that the plot is so linked to what is happening in the world today," comments Kay Hadwick, librarian. "The author shoehorns in layer upon layer of contemporary events, which stopped the book being so enjoyable."

Leather's attention to detail, with many technical references and mentions of gadgets, proved indigestible to some readers, as did his "opinionated authorial voice". Hadwick explains: "One reader felt that the

way that Leather refers to the terrorist ringleader as 'The Saudi' was derogatory and conformed to Western stereotypes of rich Arabs. He also objected to a reference to Armenians being terrorists, which he considered to be factually incorrect."

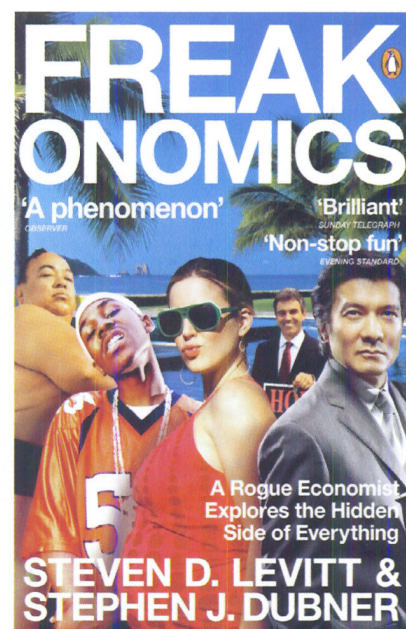
Leather's lack of character development was another talking point. While some readers appreciated *Cold Kill*'s no-nonsense approach to Shepherd's emotional life, others thought that Leather could have elaborated on the single parent's admission that he prioritises his job over the needs of his young son. "You think that Shepherd is going to have a fundamental think about his working life and his son, and then Leather glosses over it for the sake of the plot," Hadwick says.

However, issues that might have been picked up on by other reading groups—such as Leather's blanket description of female characters as "intelligent but beautiful", and his scenes of hardcore violence—were not considered a problem by Highdown. The sidelining of female characters was even considered a bonus: Shepherd's lack of romantic liaisons was found "refreshing", while the tragic death of his wife was thought to be a smart move on the part of the author to free up his central character both morally and physically.

Overall, the group gave *Cold Kill* seven out of 10: even the book's detractors grudgingly admitted that Leather had produced a "good, fast-paced action thriller".



Leather: an "opinionated authorial voice"



Freakish success

Penguin is using a Tube campaign to convey the cult message of Levitt and Dubner's *Freakonomics* to a wider, mainly male, audience. By **Harriet Dennys**

Penguin's strategy for the paperback of *Freakonomics* is to break the book out beyond its successful hardback (which has sold 40,000 copies since publication last July) to a much more general market. Penguin hopes that the unusual title will be "one of the biggest non-fiction paperbacks of the year". Gina Luck, marketing manager for Penguin Press, says: "We think that *Freakonomics* has a huge market potential, attracting readers of books on smart popular culture and psychology."

The core market for *Freakonomics*, which was published as a B format paperback on 6th April (£8.99, Penguin Press), is solvent, youngish professionals aged 25-plus, who are culturally aware and "like to keep up with the next big thing". Penguin is primarily targeting male readers. It believes that the book will be popular with people who have bought *Blink*, and those consumers with an interest in current affairs and unusual events who heard about the *Freakonomics* hardback but did not get around to buying it.

The creative for the campaign, designed to be "cool and intriguing",