

A spy is born



Lee Child's **Night School** (Bantam Press £20) is set in 1996, a year before the earlier prequel, *The Affair*. In his mid-thirties, and still in the US Army, Jack Reacher is part of a combined operation in Hamburg with the CIA and FBI. Under surveillance is a houseful of young Saudis foreshadowing the "Hamburg cell" behind 9/11,

who are middlemen between an Asian terrorist organisation and an Awol US serviceman offering the jihadis something they are prepared to pay \$100m for. Hence, as in Child's previous novel, *Make Me*, there is a central mystery to be solved (what kind of WMD could be available and worth that much?) as well as a race to prevent the evildoers succeeding.

Child's work has become ever more gripping since he began stretching the formula, telling his modern-day knight errant's backstory, giving him a girlfriend or taking him away from America. All three tweaks come together here, and another is added: *Night School* is the

closest that Reacher has come to being a secret agent, making this expertly paced thriller an addictive combination of spy yarn, detective story and

beat-'em-up fightfest.

Two narratives take turns in **No Man's Land** (Macmillan £18.99), David Baldacci's fourth John Puller thriller. In one, the sleuthing skills of the hero, a military investigator, are applied to his mother's unsolved disappearance 30 years earlier. In the other, Paul Rogers, a convicted murderer possessing superhuman strength (and blatantly modelled on *Frankenstein's Creature*), emerges from jail bent on revenge. In what has become an annual autumnal head-to-head with Child – in this case with similar heroes and the same underlying theme of secret military projects – Baldacci is the clear loser in 2016 because dealing with army types seems to make his plotting and writing stiffer and dumber. Lacking the author's usual razzle-dazzle, the book advances ponderously and predictably, and too many pages become irksome stacks of one-sentence paragraphs, treating readers as idiots.

At the beginning of **Doug** Johnstone's **Crash Land** (Faber £12.99), a plane from Kirkwall to mainland Scotland comes down soon after takeoff, killing seven

people. Finn, the novel's student protagonist, survives, and so does Maddie, a flirty woman he has just met in the airport bar; but she then vanishes, under suspicion of contributing to the disaster, and goes on the run. Although never

sure she is as sin-free as she claims, Finn secretly finds her somewhere to hide on the island. Where Ann Cleeves uses Shetland as a setting for her hardboiled detective mysteries, Johnstone takes a classic film noir set-up (an innocent beguiled into being the accomplice of a femme who might be fatale) and transposes it from California to a vividly portrayed Orkney. This works a treat, although he loses points for less than even-handed characterisation; whereas his Orcadian women are fully realised, his men tend to be cardboard stereotypes.

Call me old-fashioned, but a book called **The Reykjavik Assignment** (Head of Zeus £18.99) really ought to arrive there before halfway. Not until page 335, however, does Adam LeBor's 416-page novel deliver on its titular promise, as national leaders fly to Iceland for a summit. Before then, his series heroine, Yael Azoulay (a United Nations covert fixer), and a multinational cast of diplomats, spies and journalists rattle around New York, fretting, scheming, pursuing and threatening. In his valiant bid to make the UN exciting (not a talking shop, but a hive of espionage and intrigue) LeBor tries too hard, overdoing the thriller element so that his serious points about the organisation and

