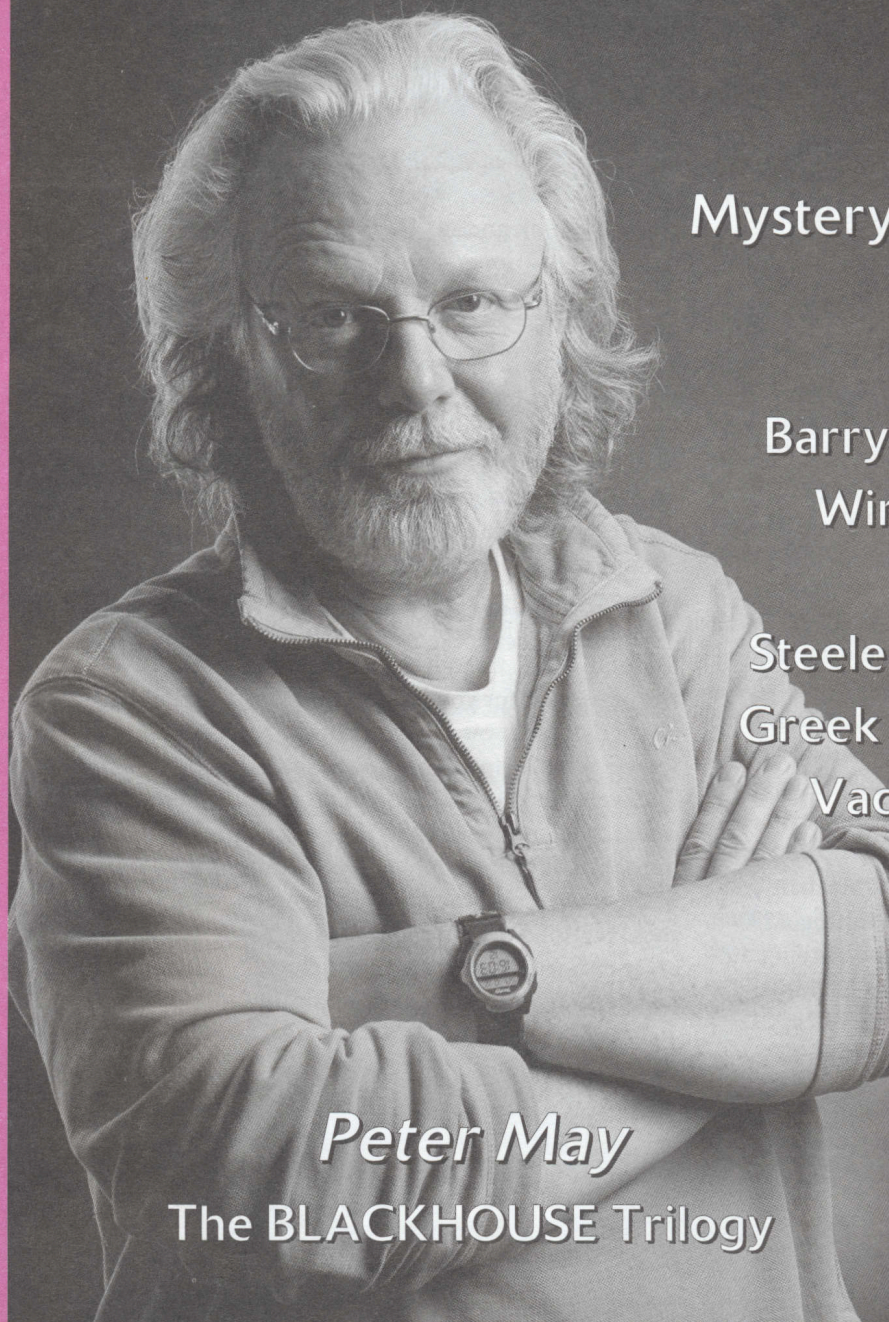


# *Deadly Pleasures* *Mystery Magazine*



Mystery Trilogies

Barry Award  
Winners

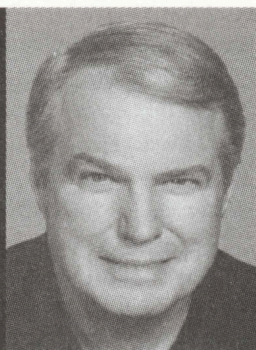
Steele Curry's  
Greek Reading  
Vacation

*Peter May*  
The BLACKHOUSE Trilogy



# A Greek Reading Feast

By Steele Curry



For three months, I'm back at "Lizard in the Sun" on the Greek island of Skiathos in the Aegean Sea. My wife Judy and I have been coming here every summer for close to 40 years. From our arrival on May 26, we've had a ringside seat to the impending collapse of Greece and its on-again off-again exit from the Euro Zone. Surprisingly, while Greek politics and its economy continue to go through the wringer (an understatement), life on the islands continues pretty much as it always has.

Much of my time at Lizard in the Sun is spent reading on its terrace that has an unbelievably beautiful view looking across the Aegean Sea. During the summer here, I usually read 30-35 books, mostly mysteries and thrillers with many of them by new authors, including a lot of translated novels. Here are some of the notable books I read this past summer in Skiathos:

**SONS OF SPARTA** by Jeffrey Siger (Poisoned Pen Press 2014 hardcover). To speed up my adopting a Greek mentality upon arrival, six years ago I started a practice of first reading the newest book by Jeffrey Siger in his series featuring Chief Inspector Andreas Kaldis, head of Greece's Special Crimes Division. Each of the author's novels is mainly set in a different historically significant part of the country where Kaldis and his police associates are sent to investigate major crimes and high-level corruption.

**SONS OF SPARTA** takes place in the Mani region of the Peloponnese part of Greece, once the location of the ancient city of Sparta and its warriors who vanished centuries ago without a trace. Over the subsequent years, the Mani has experienced waves of different invaders, generations of family vendettas and

more than its share of piracy, crime and corruption.

For a change, a large part of this book concerns Detective Yiannis Kouros of the Special Crimes Division whose family is from the Mani. The uncle of Kouros summons him to come from Athens to attend a meeting about the sale of a major family property. Kouros is aware that his uncle was formerly the dominant crime-lord in the Mani. Shortly afterwards, the uncle is murdered, raising the likelihood of the start of another vendetta with other families. Of course, additional murders follow, leading back to government corruption in Athens. Along the way, the author portrays the foibles and tribulations of current day Greece with a somewhat light touch given the desperate straits the country is actually experiencing.

**THE BURNING GATES** by Parker Bilal (Bloomsbury 2015 trade paperback U.K./hc U.S.). This is fourth book in a truly outstanding series featuring Makana, a private investigator in Cairo who was forced to flee his native Sudan where he was a senior police officer after witnessing the death of his wife and only daughter. Makana is retained by Cairo's leading art dealer to locate a valuable Impressionist painting in the possession of an Iraqi war criminal hiding somewhere in Cairo, a city of 18 million people. Makana discovers that a vengeful band of American mercenaries is also hunting the same individual. Bodies start piling up and some senior members of the Cairo police want to arrest Makana as the most likely person responsible. Assisted in part by two of Cairo's leading crime-lords, Makana perseveres with his investigations. Parker Bilal is the pseudonym of Jamal

Mahjoub, the author of seven acclaimed literary novels.

**THE LONG AND FARAWAY GONE** by Lou Berney (William Morrow trade paperback 2015). What a fabulous book! In a departure from his two previous "Shake" novels, the author has written a dynamite tale of two parallel crimes that occurred in Oklahoma City in 1986. One involved the shooting of six movie-theater employees in a robbery and the other the disappearance of a teenage girl from a state fair. Now, 25 years later, the two individuals most affected by these tragedies are back in their hometown seeking to uncover the still unanswered questions to what really happened. In the process, their lives briefly intersect. Lou Berney is a master story-teller whose treatment of characterization, dialogue and plot is superb.

**THE WASHINGTON STRATAGEM** by Adam Lebor (Bourbon Street Books trade paperback 2014). This is the author's second novel that features the engaging Yael Azoulay, a covert negotiator and trouble-shooter working for the Secretary-General of the UN. Azoulay is tasked with investigating the Prometheus Group, a powerful Washington, D.C. based lobbying organization with close high-level ties to the U.S. military and intelligence agencies. When Azoulay uncovers a conspiracy revealing that Prometheus, certain agencies of the American government and Iran are all secretly working together to disrupt peace in the Middle East, she has to go on the run to avoid a series of assassination attempts on her life. As was the case with the previous novel, *The Geneva Option*, along the way the reader is exposed to the many failures of the UN and its dysfunctional character. It is debatable whether there is enough substance here to prolong this series despite the author's writing skill.

**TIN SKY** by Ben Pastor (Bitter Lemon Press 2015 trade paperback London/New York). This is the fourth book in the author's series featuring Major Martin Bora, an aristocratic counter-intelligence officer in the German Army. It takes place in the German-occupied part of the Ukraine in the spring of 1943. Bora is investigating the death of



two Russian generals while in the custody of the Germans. One of the generals had just defected, surrendering in a new model Russian tank, and the other had been captured after his plane crashed in German territory.

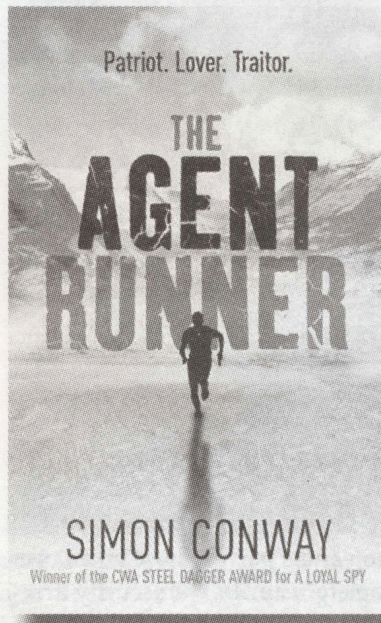
Like the prior novels, Bora becomes enmeshed in the ongoing power struggle between the German Army, the SS and the Gestapo. This is heightened by Bora giving evidence to a German judge regarding possible war crimes committed by some of the German forces. The three previous books in this series were superb combinations of mystery fiction, war stories and historical novels. Unfortunately, this book is a dud, defeating me half-way through with its boring, meandering details and slow moving plot.

**THE SCAPEGOAT** by Sophia Nikolaidou (Melville House hc 2015 Brooklyn). This novel alternates between two key periods of Greek history – the Civil War of the late 1940s and the country's current financial crisis. It is partly based on an actual event, namely the discovery in 1948 of the body of a murdered American CBS reporter floating in the bay off the city of Thessaloniki. At the time, there was huge pressure from all sides, including the American government, for the case to be solved swiftly. This resulted in an innocent small-time Greek journalist being convicted on the basis of his confession, obtained through torture.

The book flashes forward and back between the experiences of a rebellious high school student caught up in Greece's present day financial turmoil and the era of the Civil War. The student is assigned a school project of finding out "the truth" of what really happened to the murdered American correspondent. Apportioning the blame for causing such a miscarriage of justice in the context of the Civil War proves just as difficult as is determining the actual culprits for Greece's current financial ruin. Perhaps the first sentence of this book offers a clue, "Every crook in Greece is in the government", said by a villager in 1948. Hmm, has anything fundamentally changed since then? I hope that more books by this terrific Greek author will

be published in English.

**THE AGENT RUNNER** by Simon Conway (Pembury House trade paperback 2014 Kent, U.K.). This is a great espionage novel. Set primarily in current day Pakistan, Afghanistan and London, this is a sizzler of a tale that fully captures the black art of the spy world in all its duplicity and convoluted machinations. Ed Malik is an agent runner for MI6, running an agent code-named Nightingale inside Pakistan's ISI, its Hydra-headed powerful spying agency. When Osama bin Laden is killed hiding inside Pakistan, the Nightingale becomes exposed, resulting in his termination by one of ISI's legendary spymasters, Major-General Khan.



Ed is dismissed from MI6 in disgrace and leaves his spying career behind... or does he? Some time thereafter, Ed takes a job with a London trucking firm that transfers him to its offices in Lahore, Pakistan. Not a wise move if his intension was to stay out of trouble. The backstory of this fabulous novel is the overwhelming incompetence displayed by both the U.S. and Britain in their involvements in this part of the world.

**RYDER** by Nick Pangelley (Harper Collins trade paperback 2015 Toronto). Author's debut novel features Ayesha Ryder, a former Fedayeen Palestinian terrorist, now the director of research for a well-respected Middle East think tank in London. This is a high-octane

thriller rich in historical details about Palestine, Lawrence of Arabia and the struggle to form Israel, plus a plethora of kidnappings, terrorist acts, killings, assassination attempts and betrayals surrounding the impending announcement by the Israeli Prime Minister and a prominent Palestinian leader of the creation of an independent Palestine state. Ayesha proves to be indestructible as she battles the Zionist extremists opposing such a state. Most of the other formidable characters in this book are also females.

The second of this adventure series, Ryder: **AMERICAN TREASURE**, has already been published. The author is originally from Australia but now lives in Toronto.

**THE UNFORGIVEN** by Sean Slater (Simon & Schuster trade paperback 2014 London). The fourth novel by this superb author, featuring Vancouver Homicide Detective Jacob Striker and his partner Felicia Santos. This time they are pursuing a serial killer who uses arson to murder his victims. How are the murders connected? Are they an act of retribution for something committed over 20 years ago? In what way were two members of the Catholic Church involved? Is the practice of Satanism playing some kind of common role in the lives of the murderer and his victims? Will Striker and Santos themselves survive this investigation? This author is in the same league as Michael Connelly in terms of the quality and character of his writing. Sean Slater is the pseudonym for Vancouver Police Officer Sean Sommerville.

**THE HEART OF HELL** by Alen Mattich (Spiderline/House of Anansi Press trade paperback 2015 Toronto). It's the fall of 1991. Yugoslavia is disintegrating into a brutal civil war. In Croatia, three American agents have been killed in a failed mission to kill a Yugoslav assassin. The Americans send another team into Croatia to compel former secret policeman Marko della Torre to find Julius Strumbić, the man they think was responsible for setting up their dead agents. Old friends, Della Torre and Strumbić decide to work together to find out exactly what the



Americans are trying so hard to cover up. Their quest takes them to Dubrovnik, Belgrade and finally to Vukovar, a city whose destruction by shelling during the civil war was comparable to that experienced by Stalingrad in 1943. They arrive there just days before Vukovar is overrun by the Yugoslav Army led by Serb Chetnik militias who slaughter the surviving males left in the city.

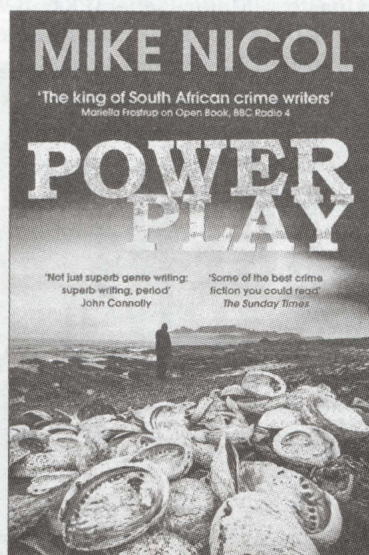
This is the third book in an outstanding series featuring Marko della Torre. Born in Zagreb, Croatia, the author is now based in London as a financial journalist.

**THE ENGLISH GIRL** by Daniel Silva (Harper hardcover 2013/trade paperback 2014). Yes, it's a subjective call, but for sheer reading pleasure, I find this author's espionage-related novels, featuring the Israeli spy Gabriel Allon, to be consistently outstanding. The British Prime Minister's secret mistress, Madeline Hart, is kidnapped on holidays in Corsica. The identity of the kidnappers and their demands are unknown. The head of MI5 asks Allon to find and rescue Hart before she is executed. Unable to refuse as British Intelligence recently saved Allon's life, he fields an Israeli team of agents and an English professional hit-man to undertake this mission. Not to give too much away but a lot of the action is set in and around Moscow and St. Petersburg. Silva's depiction of the despotic character of current-day Russia is depressingly realistic.

**BLESSED ARE THE DEAD** by Malla Nunn (Washington Square Press trade paperback 2012). This is the third novel I've read by this terrific author, each one set in 1950s apartheid South Africa featuring Detective Sergeant Emmanuel Cooper and his junior partner Detective Constable Samuel Shabalala, a Zulu. A beautiful 17 year-old girl was found murdered halfway between the compound of her father's Zulu clan and a divided white farming community. Cooper and Shabalala are sent to this remote rural area in the Drakensberg Mountains to bring her murderer to justice. There are no suspects, nil evidence at the crime scene and none of the locals is divulging any information about what

might have happened. The detectives discover that the victim's life was closely intertwined with both the black and white communities in a number of different secret ways. Cooper and Shabalala must navigate the widely disparate cultural differences of the locals, including the traditional Zulu clan, in their quest for justice. The author, Malla Nunn, was born in Swaziland, southern Africa, and now lives in Australia.

**POWER PLAY** by Mike Nicol (Old Street Publishing trade paperback 2015 Devon, U.K.). Set in Cape Town, this is another show-no-mercy, "hit'm in the gut", fast-paced crime novel by a hugely talented South African author. Krista



Bishop and a partner have taken over Complete Security, the security firm previously owned by her father Mace Bishop and his former partner Pylon Buso. Providing security services in today's Cape Town is a high risk, tough business, especially when your clients are two high-level Chinese businessmen intent on controlling the abalone poaching trade and the daughter of a crime lord involved in a gang war. Along the way, Krista has to contend with a rivalry between the Secret Service, Army Intelligence and an off-the-books secret government agency, plus a colorful cast of corrupt politicians, powerful criminals and assorted hit-men. Sometimes the violence goes over-the-top but that's part of the story. This novel would make a spectacular Quentin Tarantino movie.

**SLOW HORSES** by Mick Herron

(Soho Press trade paperback 2010/Constable hc 2010 U.K.). The author's first Slough House novel chronicling the escapades of an offshoot branch of MI5 comprised of agents who have screwed up and been demoted. Under the unorthodox leadership of Jackson Lamb, the Slough House gang undertakes a covert mission to free a kidnapped young man whose radical right-wing captors have announced their intention of beheading him in 48 hours. This is a fabulous espionage novel written by the successor to John le Carré but with the added bonus of a droll sense of humor. The second in the Slough House series, *Dead Lions*, was published in 2013 and received the much deserved CWA Gold Dagger Award.

**GAME OF MIRRORS** by Andre Camilleri (Penguin trade paperback 2014 New York/Mantle hc 2015 London). What is there to say about each successive Camilleri novel in this long-running series – you take the indomitable Chief Inspector Montalbano in Sicily and mix in a gorgeous seductress, the mafia, somebody planting bombs, several murders, different dishes of local cuisine, the capable Detective Inspector Fazio and other assorted colorful characters. The result is always an enjoyable, laid back, easy read, perfect for summertime in Greece or anywhere else.

**THE LONG FALL** by Walter Mosely (Riverhead/Penguin hc 2009 New York/Phoenix trade paperback 2010 London). The author's first Leonid McGill novel demonstrates his virtuosity in creating a strong central character and taking the reader for a journey into his hardscrabble life. McGill is a private New York investigator who is trying to go straight, a challenge when most of one's clients are more than shady. After one of his assignments results in four murders, McGill realizes he needs to uncover what happened forty years ago that is somehow linked to these murders before he becomes the next victim. One of New York's wealthiest families may be involved. In the process, McGill has to content with his faithless wife, an adoring mistress and a son who may be planning a murder himself. Mosley



excels as a master storyteller.

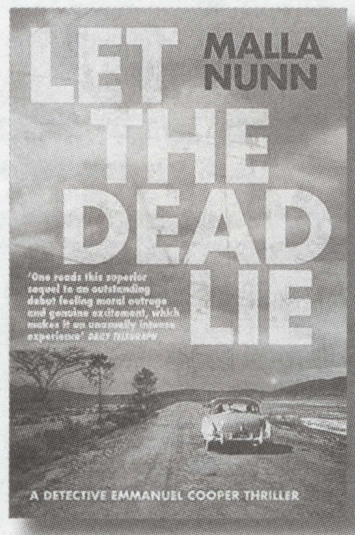
**THE CONSUMMATA** by Mickey Spillane and Max Allan Collins (Hard Case Crime/Titan Books trade paperback 2011 London). Spillane apparently started work on this novel in the late 1960s as a sequel to his bestseller *The Delta Factor*, featuring Morgan the Raider. Collins completed the novel some 40 years later as part of his authorized project to finish a number of his friend Spillane's unfinished manuscripts. It is eerie how brilliantly well Collins has taken on the mind and writing style of Spillane in authoring this novel. Wrongly accused of the heist of \$40 million by the Feds, Morgan is on the run in Miami where he decides to help a group of Cuban exiles recover some stolen money. One of his hide-outs is Miami's most luxurious brothel. Predictably, the fast-paced plot involves Morgan tangling with a string of assassins, escaping the clutches of various drop-dead beautiful women and outwitting the Feds, all with no shortage of racy scenes. To say that Spillane would be mighty proud of the job that Collins did in finishing his novel would be an understatement.

**BLACKJACK** by Andrew Vachss (Vintage Crime/Black Lizard paperback 2012). Reading Vachss novels are unique experiences. They're as hard-boiled as a grenade and as tough as a slough of alligators. This one features Cross and his diamond-edged quirky crew as they struggle with an assignment from a shadowy Federal agency to track down the source of a large number of global murders going back many years. The only common thread is that each victim was found missing its skull and spine. There are never any forensics, crime scene photos or witnesses left behind after one of these killings. The job requires Cross to go undercover as a White Power inmate at a large, racially charged, maximum security Federal prison. Cross also has to deal with a major drug lord to recover a kidnapped member of his crew.

Vachss is a brilliant storyteller whose novels feature standout ruthless characters, razor-sharp plots and fast-paced action. To take a line from **BLACK-**

**JACK**, after one of the killings, "the ace of spades and the jack of clubs floated toward the ceiling."

**LET THE DEAD LIE** by Malla Nunn (Picador trade paperback 2013 London). What a treat – getting to read two Malla Nunn novels in a summer, both featuring Detective Sergeant Emmanuel Cooper and Detective Constable Samuel Shabalala together with Doctor Zweigman and the enigmatic Colonel Van Niekerk. *Let the Dead Lie*, the second novel in this superb series, is set in Durban, South Africa in 1953. Cooper has been stripped of his police rank and accused of three brutal murders, including a young white boy.



He has 48 hours to prove his innocence or go to the gallows. Along the way, Cooper has to contend with a high-level mobster, two Russian defectors, South Africa's powerful Security Branch and Van Niekerk's mistress. Once again, the author demonstrates her talents as a wonderful storyteller.

**TATTOO** by Manuel Vazquez Montalban (Serpent's Tail trade paperback 2008 London). Author's second Pepe Carvalho novel originally published in Spain in 1976. The first, **I KILLED KENNEY**, has not been translated into English. **TATTOO** is mainly set in Barcelona but also partly in Amsterdam and chronicles Pepe's amorous adventures and gourmet meals while he pursues a murder investigation.

This Spanish author wrote 22 novels featuring his famous private detective Pepe Carvalho for which he received

many international awards. I enjoy Montalbán's books somewhat more than those of his Italian counterpart Andrea Camilleri whose novels feature a Sicilian private detective named Montalbano.

**KILLING PLATO** by Jake Needham (Marshall Cavendish trade paperback 2012 Singapore – available in the U.K.). The author's second novel to feature Jack Shepherd, a former high-power Washington, D.C. lawyer who specialized in international finance and banking before he moved to Thailand for a quieter life as a part-time professor and occasional consultant. Now, America's number one most notorious fugitive, Plato Karsarkis, is hiding out in Thailand and wants to hire Jack to obtain a presidential pardon. Everyone warns Jack not to get involved but he gets drawn in nevertheless, despite knowing there are two or three different parties intent on abducting or killing Plato. Fortunately, Jack has a network of unusual resources in the covert world of Bangkok who are prepared to offer him some support in his quest for information and survival.

Needham is a masterful thriller author whose writing style reminds me a lot of Ross Thomas. He has written four novels in his Jack Shepherd series set largely in Bangkok, three Inspector Samuel Tay novels set in Singapore and one stand-alone thriller.

**PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S SECRET** by Steven Wilson (Kensington trade paperback 2009). Several years ago, I enjoyed reading this author's *President Lincoln's Spy*. Finally, I got around to reading the sequel to this book. Both are extremely well written and researched thrillers set mainly in Washington, D.C. during the American Civil War. Lincoln recruits Colonel Fitz Dunaway to act as his agent in performing secret missions against the South. Fitz's wife Asia plays a critical role in determining their success. The author is the Curator and Assistant Director of the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum in Harrogate, Tennessee. I hope there will be more books in this excellent series.

*More information on Steele's passion for books can be found at his youth mentoring Web site at [www.COTWguides](http://www.COTWguides).*