

crime**It's murder
in the dark**

A blackout engulfs Europe in a dazzling debut. Marcel Berlins picks the month's best

The vast majority of disaster thrillers, however imaginative and entertaining, do not present a scenario that is remotely believable. The Austrian writer Marc Elsberg's **Blackout**, containing a threat to millions of people, manages to touch the bounds of reality. If anything, in the five years since its German publication, it has become more plausible. The basic plot is simple. It begins with all the traffic lights in Milan going off at the same time. Gradually, the electricity grids and systems in Europe stop working. The whole continent goes dark. It's winter and there is no electricity for heating, lighting, cooking, hospitals, phoning, charging portables, filling vehicles with fuel — or milking cows. Terrorists have broken the codes and overcome the defences that were considered impenetrable. As governments and CEOs panic, only one man knows how to restore the power.

Mark Herron's **Spook Street** is very different from other spy thrillers, except for his own previous three. His cast of eccentric secret service agents, ruled incompetent at their jobs, have been demoted to Slough House, the HQ for has-beens, and given the duller tasks possible. In practice, though, they are constantly finding themselves meddling in the exciting spook-type

Blackout
by Marc Elsberg trans.
Marshall
Yarbrough

Black Swan
437pp;
£7.99

Book
of the
month

Spook Street
by Mick Herron

John Murray
340pp; £14.99

Rattle
by Fiona Cummins

Macmillan, 483pp; £12.99

The Intrusions
by Stav Sherez

Faber, 339pp; £12.99

Devour
by LA Larkin

Constable, 407pp; £8.99



LIGHTS OUT Power fails in São Paulo; Marc Elsberg's thriller imagines European cities being darkened by a terrorist cyber-attack

events from which they had been banned by their masters. Never mind the plot details. It's all sheer fun. Herron is spy fiction's great humorist, mixing absurd situations with sparkingly funny dialogue and elegant, witty prose. In passing, he poses the question: what do you do with ageing spies who have dementia and might reveal secrets they've forgotten are confidential?

Amid the outpouring of crime novels centred on missing children, **Rattle** is up there with the best of them. Fiona Cummins has created an exceptionally creepy psychopathic killer who seeks young victims to feed his obsession with bones. One of those on his list is Jakey, who suffers seriously from Stone Man Syndrome (a real condition in which muscle turns to bone). Cummins deals movingly with the effect on the boy's parents as they try to cope with his illness as well as the danger he's in. Equally well portrayed is DS Etta Fitzroy, the detective in charge of the case,

bearing her own demons and feelings of guilt. Altogether a gem of a scary debut.

In **The Intrusions**, the cops Jack Carrigan and Geneva Miller, both in trouble with their superiors, enter the world of cheap hostels, where the impecunious young stay while they try to make good (or

An exceptionally creepy killer seeks victims to feed his obsession with bones

at least have fun) in London. A German girl, Anna, has been drugged and killed, her body carefully laid out; the friend she was with claimed she saw her being abducted and had herself been threatened, with the words, "I'll be back to claim you." Carrigan and Miller ask questions in the grim hostel. Another girl dies. Sickening

internet sites provide more clues. Stav Sherez superbly captures the dark side of happy young London. A strong story told with vivid characters and an interestingly unhappy detective duo.

The plot of LA Larkin's **Devour** could almost have been written by those great adventure thriller writers of yesteryear, Alistair MacLean and Hammond Innes. At a base in the Antarctic, British scientists are on the verge of discovering the contents of a vast and deep underground lake beneath the ice. Important drilling machinery breaks down, then one of the Brits is murdered. The Russians, too, are interested in the lake; are they responsible? Our heroine, the ultra-tough investigative journalist Olivia Wolfe, recovering from a rough time in Afghanistan and upset by the attentions of a stalker, is sent by her paper to report on the mysterious events. Larkin's fast action style is accompanied by impressive research.

audiobooks

A monster in Essex, a monstrous groom. Christina Hardyment is grimly gripped

The Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry, read by Juanita McMahon audible.co.uk, 14hr 44min, £20.89

"What use to observe the human species and try to understand it? Their rules were fathomless and no more fixed than the wind," murmurs the heroine's distinctly weird son in Sarah Perry's bestselling serpentine novel. *The Essex Serpent* is set in the 1890s. Cora, recently widowed, moves to a remote part of Essex with her son. She soon hears of local rumour and legend that there is a monster concealed in the creeks of the Blackwater.

Perry creates an extraordinary atmosphere of expectation and dread as she pits novel, evolutionary science against folklore and superstition. Cora is a fossil-collecting "new woman", eager to discover a living ichthyosaurus; the rector of Aldwinter, William Ransome, is

determined that the serpent of modern atheism will not threaten his imperfect little Eden. Their relationship is set against a richly imagined cast of locals great and small, most notably Luke Garrett, an inventive London surgeon, and Cora's communist-minded maid, Martha, who is determined to attack the evils of the London slums.

The Castle of Otranto by Horace Walpole, read by Peter Joyce audible.co.uk, 4hr 16min, £9.99

The fast-moving and spirited romance that Horace Walpole wrote in 1764 to celebrate his "little plaything of a castle", Strawberry Hill House, is the book that inspired the whole glorious and ghastly idea of gothic horror, of which Sarah Perry's tour de force is the latest. The story starts with a gigantic helmet crushing the tyrannical Duke of Otranto's only son on the morning of his wedding; his would-be bride has to flee through underground passages to escape the monstrous proposal of the already married duke to wed her himself. The action never stops and is delivered with terrific gusto by Peter Joyce. This is excellent listening.



CLASSIC Seamus Heaney was haunted from his schooldays by the Aeneid

Aeneid Book VI by Virgil, translated by Seamus Heaney, read by Ian McKellen Faber, 1hr 15min, 1 CD £10.67, download £12.99

The idea of listening just to the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* might seem odd. However, the tale of Aeneas's descent into the underworld in search of his father,

Anchises, is a myth that has left its mark on English literature, to say nothing of inspiring Dante. Seamus Heaney was haunted by it from his schooldays; it recurs in many of his poems and he chose to tell it in his own words at the end of his life. Narrated with flawless, magisterial emphasis by Ian McKellen, and retold with all Heaney's imaginative fluency, it bears listening to again and again. When Aeneas does find Anchises, "three times he tried to reach arms round that neck./ Three times the form, reached for in vain, escaped/ Like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings".

The Boy Who Could See Death by Salley Vickers, read by Anna Bentinck and Peter Noble audible.co.uk, 5hr 44min, £26.69

An eerie set of short stories by Salley Vickers, the author of *Miss Garnet's Angels*, keeps up the macabre feel of this month's round-up. They open with reflections on a gravestone by a woman deserted by her husband, and feature an inspired retelling of *The Winter's Tale* from the point of view of Leontes's son, Mamillius. Some are brief vignettes; some longer explorations of twists of fate. My favourite was *Vacation*, which explores how an unfaithful husband and his wife, united only in their dislike of his mother, change their attitudes during a Hebridean island holiday. The contrasting voices and styles of the readers add variety.