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 story is a continuous tale of survival and there is no electricity for heating, lighting, cooking, hospitals, plumbing, charging portable telephones, filling which cars with fuel — or killing cows. Terrorists have broken the codes and overcome the defences that were considered impregnable. As governments and CEOs panic, only one man knows how to resolve the crisis.

Mark Herron's Spook Street is very different from other spy thrillers, except for his own previous stories. His cast of eccentric secret service agents, ruled incompetent at their jobs, have been demoted to Slang House, the HQ for has-beens, and given the dullest tasks possible. In practice, they are constantly finding themselves muddling in the exciting spook-type events from which they had been banished by their masters. Never mind the plot of this novel. It's all sheer fun. Herron is very likable, a master at mixing absurd situations with sparklingly funny dialogue and elegant, witty prose. In parsing, he poses the question: what do you do with ageing spies who have dementia and might reveal secrets they've forgotten? Are they confidential agents?

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 Jersey, who suffers seriously from Stone Man Syndrome (a psychological 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 Elta Elroy, the detective in charge of the case, hearing her own demons and feelings of guilt. Altogether a gem of a scary debut.

In The Intrusions, the cop Jack Carrigan and Connie Miller, both in trouble with their superiors, enter the world of cheap hostels, where the infamous young stay while they try to make good (or avoid capture). The plot is almost like a thriller with a dash of crime. The action is fast-moving and the tension high. The book is well written and well executed. It will certainly keep you on the edge of your seat.

A monster in Essex, a monstrous groomsman.

Christina Hardymen is grimly gripped

The Essex Serpent by Sarah Perry, read by Justine McAlonan audible.co.uk, £14.44, £21.99

"What use to observe the human species and try to understand it? Their rules were soothsayers and so senseless. The wind" murmur the heron's distinctly weird son in Sarah Perry's compelling story of a young writer. The Essex Serpent is set in the 1890s, Cora, recently widowed, moves to a remote part of Essex with her son. She soon hears 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 raptor of Adventures, William Ransome, is determined that the serpent of modern abnormality will not threaten his perfect little Eden. Their relationship is set against the richly imagined cast of local greats 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, 4hr 39min, £1.99

"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 gaudy idea of gothic horror, of which Sarah Perry's tour de force is the latest. The story starts with a gigantic helmet crashing the topological Dilemma of Otranto's only son on his morning of his wedding; his bride has to flee through underground passages to escape the monstrous proposal of the already married duke to weld her himself. The action never stops and is delivered with terrific gusto by Peter Joyce. This is excellent listening.

Amonst Book VI by Virgil, translated by Seamus Heaney, read by Ian McKellen, 3hr 33min, £10.69, download £2.99

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 Taine. Seamus Heaney was a master of this field. He knew his Virgil and his statues, his sources are legion. The result is a rich, evocative reading.