

McMansion

From Publishers Weekly

October 9, 2006

Justin Scott. *Poisoned Pen*, \$24.95 (262p) ISBN 978-1-59058-063-0

Scott's satisfying fourth installment of his Ben Abbott series (after 2003's *Frostline*) hinges on the murder of Billy Tiller, a greedy developer determined to ruin the smalltown charm of Newbury, Conn., with a string of tacky starter palaces. When he's found dead—run over by a bulldozer—the police arrest a young environmental activist, Jeff Kimball. Ira Levy, Kimball's lawyer, asks Abbott, realtor-cum-PI, to dig around. Abbott doesn't want to take the case—he despised everything Tiller stood for and worries that his loathing might hamper his investigation—but Levy twists his arm. Abbott determines pretty speedily that Kimball couldn't have committed the crime, but figuring out who did is a tad trickier. Though the reader never gets to know Abbott very well, this novel will resonate with those in the countless communities that are beset by real estate monstrosities.

HardScape

The New York Times

Crime

By Marilyn Stasio

Short of robbing a bank, an established genre author can't make a bolder midcareer move than trying out a hero in a prospective series. Justin Scott takes the plunge in *HARDSCAPE* (Viking, \$19.95) and comes up with an amateur sleuth named Benjamin Abbott 3d, an easy-to-take charmer with a bright future. Despite his high principles ("I wasn't a liar") and scrupulous manners (he stakes his aunt's delphiniums and woos the ladies by brewing tea), this Connecticut Yankee has his quirks. Before taking over his family's flagging real estate business in the colonial town of Newbury, Ben was a Wall Street raider who did hard time in Leavenworth for insider trading. Reflecting, no doubt, a gap in his rehabilitation, the flawed hero accepts \$5,000 to take video footage of a rich man's wife cavorting with her lover. Ben ditches the job when his moral code belatedly kicks in, but he can't shake his guilt when the lover is murdered or when his own favorite cousin is killed in what might be a related crime. Mr. Scott's clean, succinct style smooths the way for a tight plot, lean dialogue and neat characterizations of the people who live on both sides of Newbury's social tracks. Best of all, there's Ben, a likable guy of sound mind and decent character, but with a shrewd sense of his limitations. In a field of fiction overrun with middle-aged boys and girls at play, let's call him an unreconstructed grown-up.

HardScape

From Publishers Weekly

Crackling with energy, this double-barreled mystery from the author of *Many Happy Returns* auspiciously launches an appealing new hero lightly brushed with sleaze. Benjamin Abbot III, a former investigator for Naval Intelligence and a Wall Street bond trader who served time for insider dealing, now runs the family real estate agency in his upscale hometown of Newbury, Conn. A New York City PI working for wealthy businessman Jack Long, who owns a weekend estate in Newbury, offers Ben \$5000 to videotape Jack's artist wife Rita with her lover. Ben, who wants to winterize his barn, uneasily accepts. Midway through the job, however, his conscience wins out and he destroys the tape. The next day, the lover is found murdered on the Long's property and Rita is arrested. That evening, the body of Ben's reputable cousin Renny is discovered in a small plane, shot through the head and sprinkled with cocaine. Are the murders connected? Rita hires Ben to find her lover's killer, retaining him even after he tells her about the taping. As the decent--and not so nice--citizens of Newbury, who have lifted gossip to a new art form, talk about the crime, Ben picks up key information from an unlikely source. This is a tightly knit, continually engrossing mystery, with a warm-hearted sleuth who deftly blends skills gleaned from prep school, Wall street and Leavenworth. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

StoneDust

March 5, 1995

The New York Times

Crime

By Marilyn Stasio

You couldn't ask for a more picturesque demise -- on a quaint covered bridge in "the prettiest town in New England" -- than the one arranged for Reg Hopkins in Justin Scott's *STONE-DUST* (Viking, \$19.95). Not that Reg was in any shape to appreciate his artistic death scene: according to a state trooper in Newbury, Conn., the upstanding young businessman died from a heroin "hotload."

The ambitious executives and grasping entrepreneurs in Reg's smart set would like to hush up the nasty business and just get on with their P.T.A. meetings and Jacuzzi orgies. Only Benjamin Abbott 3d, a descendant of the Yankee ministers and horse traders who originally settled Newbury, tries to clear the reputation of his childhood friend.

Speaking in wry, dry accents as the witty narrator of these suburban scandals, Ben is not a sweet talker or a fast talker, but a genuine smoothie. A former Wall Streeter who did time in Leavenworth for insider trading, this offbeat freelance sleuth is currently eking out a cleaner, duller living as a realtor. Ben lays some lovely traps for the social parvenus whose moral values are no less dubious than their business ethics. But it's his sardonic views on his self-important neighbors that give this sophisticated series its unexpected and wholly delicious tartness.