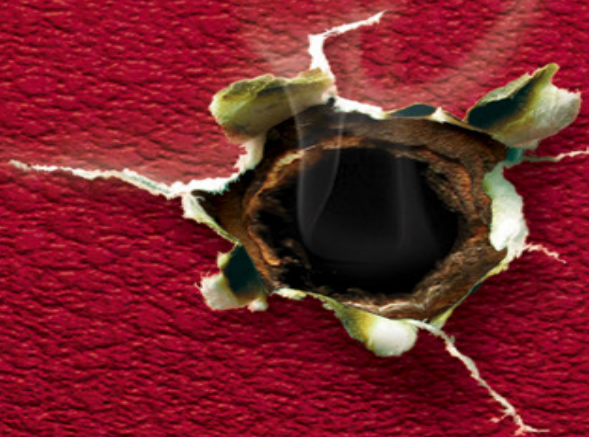


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JOHN DUNNING

*NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE BOOKMAN'S PROMISE*



BOOKED TO DIE

A CLIFF JANEWAY NOVEL

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John Dunning

Booked
To Die

A Mystery Introducing
Cliff Janeway



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About John Dunning

'Two O'Clock, Eastern Wartime' Excerpt

*To Warwick Downing,
who got me started again,
and
to the Denver antiquarian book trade:
the good, the bad, and the ugly*

Then and Now

Booked to Die was published by Scribner on January 23, 1992. It was my first novel in ten years, after a checkered career that produced five books at four publishing houses, with long periods of rejection between them. The initial printing was smallish, 6,500 hardbound copies, and I figured it would go like all the others—a flurry of local activity on and around pub day: perhaps, if the gods were smiling, an even smaller second printing; then the slow fade, the gradual trickle-down into the out-of-print (OP) bookstores.

But this was okay. Hey, I was happy just to be alive again. It had been a very long time, and for a writer who's not publishing, who for much of that decade isn't even writing, there's a hollow feeling under the breastbone that I can only call creative death.

At the time I owned an OP bookstore in East Denver. I was eight years into my new career as a dealer in used and rare books. This of course is not the literal truth: a dealer on the street will seldom, if ever, see a truly rare book. He may handle hundreds of pieces that can legitimately be called scarce, but he doesn't hold his breath waiting for *The Bay Psalm Book* to walk in the front door. The notion persists because the dealer likes the sound of it. "Seller of Rare Books" sounds so much classier than the terms "secondhand," "used," or any of the derivatives that conjure up the images and smells of dust, frayed spines, broken hinges and, worst of all, mold.

So he lists himself as "rare" and hopes for a scarcity or two to brighten his week. He doesn't deal in new books, or, if he does, he marks them down from their original cover prices and hopes to sell them at 50 percent off. I had no plans to sell my own book in the store: it was my wife who had the first hunch about *Booked to Die*.

"Let's get twenty-five copies and sell them at full price," she said. I could hardly believe my ears. "My God, we'll still have half of them when Halley's Comet comes around again," I said. But she is not to be denied when she gets

that way, so we ordered the twenty-five copies long before pub day and had them well displayed, to my own discomfort, when January 23 arrived.

They sold overnight, all of them gone as if by magic. But the big surprises were yet to come.

The next day I called Scribner to get fifty more but they were out of stock. The entire first printing had sold: the second printing would be off the press in a few weeks. Talk about mixed feelings! Yes, it was thrilling, gratifying, but here I was, allegedly a dealer in “used and rare books,” and I couldn’t get first editions of my own novel.

Soon I began hearing, through the bookseller’s grapevine, startling stories of dealer hoarding. Out-of-print booksellers had bought them by the case and were stashing them in a gamble that the price would go up. Six weeks after publication—just about the time the second printing was showing up in new bookstores—firsts were selling on the OP market for \$50 and up. I began buying them at cover price: whenever I saw one that had slipped through the cracks and was still lingering on a B. Dalton shelf, I snatched it up and happily paid the \$19.95 cover price. When I went to signings and there were firsts unbought, I bought them, greedily, voraciously, without shame.

Eight years later I see the first printings on the Internet for \$500 to \$850, and there is one brassy soul (there’s always one of these) who wants \$1,250 for his. The book has gone through four hardcover and at least nineteen paperback printings, and has just been reissued in both hard and paper editions.

How did this happen? Let me count the ways.

In 1992 the book world was a far different animal than it is today. *Booked to Die* caught the trade at the edge of a revolutionary upheaval that is still going on. The Internet was then in its infancy: indeed, though pockets of wisdom and tradition can still be found, though crusty old-timers will tell you that a rare book can always be reliably sold for more money than you paid for it, in real life the Internet has turned the trade on its head.

A book search was a cumbersome process in 1992, with the venerable old trade journal *AB/Bookman’s Weekly* at its center. If you wanted a book that was long out of print, you first contacted your local bookseller. If he didn’t have it, he placed a one-line ad for it in the BOOKS WANTED section of the *AB*. This fat sheath of eye-straining type, sometimes dozens of pages long, was

scanned by booksellers everywhere. If someone had the book, he might quote a price for it by postcard to your neighborhood bookseller, who then quoted it to you, with his profit built into the mix. But all this took weeks to run its course, and in the case of a really scarce book there might not be any response at all.

In 1992, there was still a strong thread of common sense in the book world. The world *hypermodern* had not yet been heard, except perhaps by a few intense collectors whose span of reference for the 500-year-old industry began in 1980. For those who have remained pure in spirit and still haven't heard it, a hypermodern is a book that has a small first printing, goes immediately into later printings, is touted wildly by word of mouth, and becomes so hotly sought so quickly that people begin paying big money—sometimes insane money—for the first printings while the book itself is still selling well on the new-book market. Does this begin to sound familiar? More about this phenomenon in a moment.

Before 1992 there was a strong belief, even by serious collectors of “modern first editions,” that a book needed at least some age before any kind of realistic value could be established. The rise of the so-called modern classic was slow but sure, maybe 10 percent a year *after* the book had truly gone out of print, maybe a blip on that chart when additional books confirmed the author's stature, maybe another blip when the author died and his or her name was again in the news. After that it all depended on a new generation, and the next generation, and the one after that. But a strong writer could be depended on to grow in value, from one generation to the next, as his books became “classic” and the first editions became “rare.”

That was then: this is now.

Now the *AB* is gone, a casualty of the Internet.

Now anyone with a home computer can do his own book search—in seconds, not weeks. This is fine on the face of it, but it has led to a mentality of *what-is-it-worth?* above all else, the blind leading the blind, recalling Oscar Wilde's acid-dipped comment about the people who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Today, there is a feeling that if something sells quickly, it must've been underpriced. There is a tendency to go ever higher until that brick wall is hit