

A different kind of crime thriller intrigues **Alan Montague**. **Jennifer Lipman** admires a segmented psychic tale

Strange case of a writer's murder



Blood on the Page

Thomas Harding

William Heinemann, £14.99

Reviewed Alan Montague

I WAS one of the most intriguing murder cases in British legal history. Wang Yam, a Chinese dissident, was convicted of murdering an elderly British author and sentenced to 20 years in prison. But he continues to protest his innocence 12 years after his arrest.

Nothing unusual there – plenty of convicts claim they did not commit the crime. But very few are tried in secret. Parts of Wang Yam's trial at the Old Bailey were heard in camera, with the presiding judge,

Mr Justice Ouseley, ordering that anyone reporting the proceedings would be guilty of contempt. Not only that but anyone even speculating on why the trial was being held behind closed doors would also be guilty of

contempt. That order still stands, and Thomas Harding's book is bound by it, as indeed is this review.

Thomas Harding: 'I wanted to know who killed my neighbour'



Anyone reporting would be guilty of contempt

Eighty-six-year-old Allan Chappelow — who in younger days wrote a well-received biography of George Bernard Shaw — was bludgeoned to death in 2006 in his dilapidated Regency house in Downshire Hill, Hampstead. The police contended that the killing was the result of a burglary that went wrong — which makes the contempt order even more mysterious.

Journalist Thomas Harding cites the judge's ruling that there are exceptions

to the requirement that trials should be held in open court where national security is at stake or a witness's identity needs to be protected.

Which is as far as Harding, or anyone, can go by way of explanation. "There is a necessary lacuna at the heart of this book," he writes.

Harding — author of *Hanns and Rudolf* — grew up in Downshire Hill and became fascinated by the case. "I wanted to know who killed my neighbour," he says.

Wang Yam was arrested after trying to cash one of Chappelow's cheques. He was charged with murder

despite there being no forensic evidence placing him at the scene.

The dissident had been involved in the Tiananmen Square student protests in Beijing in 1989 and had sought asylum in the UK three years later. He claimed to be a relative of one of the heroes of

the Chinese Communist revolution, but family members Harding interviewed accused Wang Yam of lying.

Having worked in nuclear research in China, he set up a series of unsuccessful businesses once he arrived in the West, and was eventually declared bankrupt. He had no history of violence, and insisted he had never met Chappelow.

Over two years, Harding interviewed the police, lawyers, witnesses and relatives of both Wang Yam and Chappelow.

He concluded that Wang Yam, fantasist and thief though he might be, may very well be innocent of murder.

Harding says police failed to take into account a similar theft that took place near Chappelow's home a few months after the murder, or a similar murder of an elderly man that took place in Highgate in 2005, which Wang Yam couldn't possibly have committed. Then there are the unexplained drops of wax and cigarette butts found near Chappelow's body.

Harding also criticises officers for overlooking the possibility that the killer could be a companion Chappelow met at a gay cruising spot on Hampstead Heath and invited home.

By the end of 300 pages, which culminate with Wang Yam's final appeal being dismissed, there is no resolution. But there are enough questions raised by Harding's meticulous research to suggest that reasonable doubt hangs over the conviction.

Meanwhile, Wang Yam remains in prison and, as Harding suggests, a murderer may still be at large on the streets of Hampstead.

Alan Montague is the JC's news editor

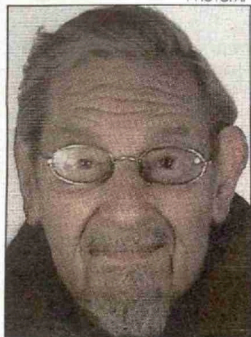


PHOTO: AP



Allan Chappelow (top) and Wang Lam