Murder by Manuscript is the second in Steve J. Spears’ Pentangeli Papers series. Spears is obviously enjoying himself: the author bio tells us that ‘he is working on further volumes’ (plural) in the series.

Pentangeli is the surname of his detective-journalist, Stella. Tall, glamorous, sex-starved and blonde, she teams up with the diminutive police detective Investigator Ng to solve bizarre murders. She would like to team up with him in other ways as well, but somehow it never quite happens. Why spoil all that sexual tension, with more books to come?

Murder by Manuscript is a delicious spoof on the detective genre. Ng is small but incredibly potent. A cool, courteous but unassuming manner is backed up with cunning in dealing with powerful opponents, and the well-directed use of force when essential. He pacifies his brutish, angry colleague Sgt. Cross (addressed always as Sgt.) within minutes, transforming him into a docile, intelligent and loyal officer. He even takes on the shadowy agent of the United States, known for convenience as Sam, and reduces him to reluctant obedience. And he lives by choice in a seedy motel on the wrong side of town. Unusually for a police hero, he even has his boss on side.

Murder by Manuscript is set in an Australian version of Gotham City, with its own redolently-named districts: East Sweethurst, Viceroy Valley (Vice Valley for short), Bayside Bay, the Lofty Ranges (but no, this isn’t Adelaide) – and its own media outlets: the daily City Press and the nightly Hard Currently...
on commercial television. The racy text is peppered with headlines from Stella’s e-zine, The Pentageli Papers. Along with the extravagant parody, there is a fair dose of clever satire. The Police Minister, for example, looks ‘as if he was somehow as not-in-the-room as it was possible to be while still being actually in the room.’

Quite coincidentally, the plot of *Murder by Manuscript* bears a resemblance to Matthew Pearl’s *The Dante Club*. Each features a detective from an ethnic minority, and a serial killer using a formula based on coded instructions in a literary work – in this case a bloodthirsty and inelegant manuscript of Shakespeare which, without giving too much away, I can assure anxious readers is soon exposed as a forgery. The crimes in both cases are lurid and sadistic. But Spears doesn’t put too much effort into the literary aspect, compared with Pearl’s bravura use of Dante and Tennyson. At any rate, these are only superficial similarities. The two novels are as different as they can be while both being whodunnits. Spears’ is pure escapism, and not the kind of novel you would feel the need to read again. Clever, funny and occasionally erudite, with a showbiz monk and an American agent with a background in post-mediaeval Latin, it is not to be taken seriously on any level, but highly enjoyable and a rapid read.