

All in the Family

Maffini and daughter team up for new series

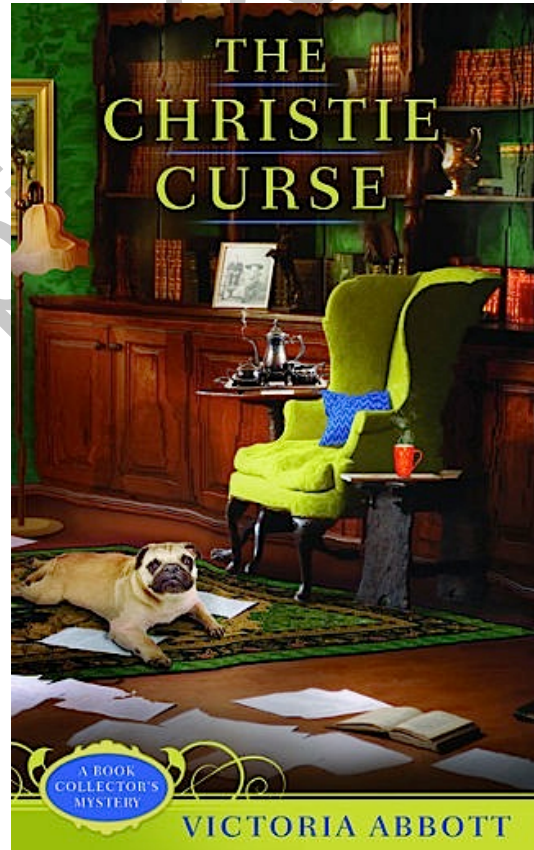
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

For some time now Canadian crime writer Mary Jane Maffini has been entertaining readers with her award-winning humorous cozies. With thirteen books already to her credit she has recently teamed up with her daughter Victoria, and together they've launched a new series of lighthearted tales under the name of Victoria Abbott. *The Christie Curse* marks their debut, and will appeal to Maffini's already-established legion of fans and, I predict, many new readers as well.

Jordan Bingham has recently graduated with a Master's degree in English, and could use some cash. Her (recently-ex) boyfriend maxed out her credit card without telling her, and her ability to afford further studies is looking more and more remote. So when she answers an advert for a researcher she sees some light at the end of the tunnel that, for once, is not the headlamp of an oncoming train. She journeys to Harrison Falls, NY, to meet her prospective employer

and encounters an elderly, wheelchair-bound woman who gives the term 'cantankerous' new



depth. The last of her family, Vera Van Alst, is hated by the local townspeople; she uses her wealth to indulge her personal ambitions, one of which is to track down a

rumoured unknown play by Agatha Christie, allegedly written during her well-known disappearance in England in 1926. Jordan accepts the task and is given the use of an attic apartment in the Van Alst mansion while she does her work, attended by a Siamese cat with a penchant for clawing her legs. Only later does she learn that a previous researcher employed by the eccentric Van Alst, Alexander Fine, had died when he was pushed into the path of an oncoming train while looking for the very same manuscript.

Jordan wisely elects to keep from her employer knowledge of her shady family. Uncle Mick and uncle Lucky have what can be described charitably as a rather tenuous relationship with the law. Happily, though, they're friendly with Salvatore Tascone, a local mobster who has a professional interest in locating missing artifacts. She visits the man, learning only that he knows of the rumoured missing play, and receiving a vague promise that he'll get back to her if he learns anything. On leaving, Jordan is surprised to see a local uniformed cop, Tyler Dekker, whom she'd noticed earlier near her uncles' place of business, also lingering outside Tascone's office. Is he following her? And if so, why?

Visiting the late Alex Fine's parents, in the hope that there might be a clue to the missing manuscript amongst his research papers, Jordan is surprised to learn that after Fine's death Vera Van Alst had claimed that all his research belonged to her, and insisted that the family return to her all his papers – a fact that the elderly woman had kept from Jordan. Things are getting curiouser and curiouser, and before the tale comes to its conclusion innocent people's lives will be put at risk.

The Christie Curse has all the hallmarks of an experienced author's writing -- an engaging sleuth, a cast of eccentric but believable characters, and a plausible storyline. Cleverly crafted with a plotline that reaches back decades, rooted in a tragedy that will take on a life of its own, the tale is leavened by the authors' sardonic humour:

"When the paneled oak door swung open, a gray-haired, pointy woman in a wheelchair looked up and eyed me as if I was something brown and gooey that had attached itself to one of her wheels..."

Fans will be delighted to learn that the second book in this series, *The Sayers Swindle*, is being completed

as this review goes to press. If *The Christie Curse* is any indication, it will be well worth looking for.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetinger*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and the *Montreal Review of Books*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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