

DEATH BY PROXY

Mark Billingham serves up a winner

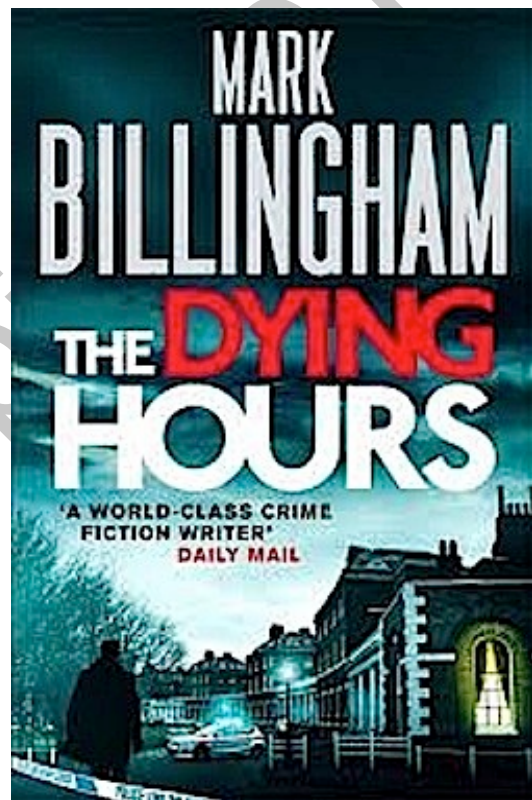
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Prison affects people in different ways. For some, it's merely the cost of doing business. Others find themselves ground down by prison life, the routine and regimentation eating away at their will to live, becoming resigned to their fate, and eventually surrendering to it. Still others — fortunately a very few — nurse a grudge the whole time they're banged up, allowing it to fester and grow until the day they are released and a monster re-enters civilian life, ready to work a slow, tortured havoc on those who put them away.

Tom Thorne is living with his lover, DS Helen Weeks, and her toddler son Alfie, each trying to piece their lives back together. Helen's partner had been killed in a siege almost two years earlier, and Thorne demoted to the uniformed ranks three months ago for having crossed the line with his superiors once too often. When their son hadn't heard from his parents for several days he'd contacted the police. When officers find them dead, overdosed

on insulin, Thorne is called to the scene.



London is facing a rash of suicides amongst its aging population. An elderly couple that had OD'd on insulin; an older man who'd slit his wrists in the bathtub; another who popped pills and tied a bag over his head; a woman who simply walked into a reservoir and drowned, the event documented

on nearby CCTV. In each case the means of death is different, and there is little room for doubt that the deaths were self-inflicted. But Tom Thorne is convinced there is something more sinister at work. Thorne tries — not once, but twice — to get the suits in CID to take an interest in the deaths, and is slapped down both times for his efforts. Budgets are tight. There's no evidence to suggest homicide. You're in uniform now, Thorne; leave the big stuff to the lads in CID.

Thorne decides to go it nearly alone, aided only by a fellow officer willing to put his own pension on the line for the gut

instinct of a friend. Before long a pattern emerges, and they identify the perpetrator; but when the killer targets Thorne and his new family, the ball is clearly in Thorne's court.

Using multiple viewpoints Mark Billingham skillfully captures the tensions over their jobs between officers and their colleagues and their spouses, set against the twisted mind of a serial killer who's had decades to perfect his plans. Convincing characters in a layered plot with well-paced suspense from an award-winning author with more than a dozen novels under his belt. Who could ask for more?

Originally posted on *Reviewing the Evidence*, December 2013.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *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

