

Great Beginnings

Debut crime writers make strong start

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

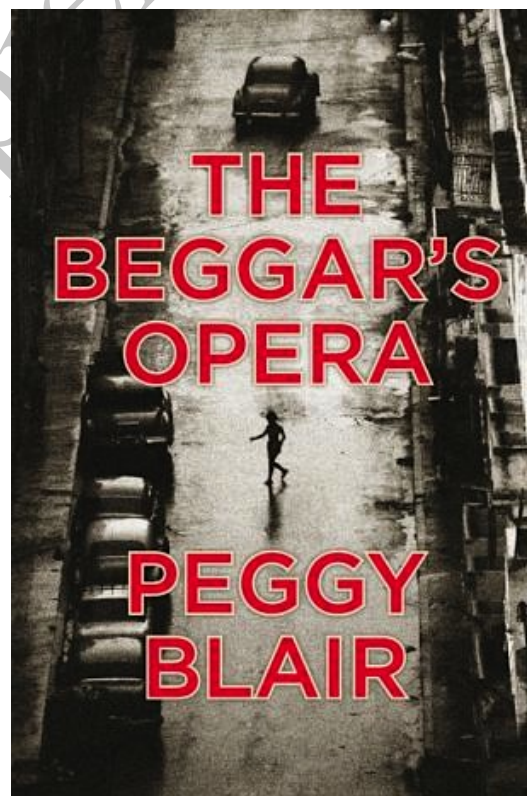
No, I'm not talking about salad dressings or baby furniture. The turning of the calendar also marks the beginning of a new publishing year, one presaged by the arrival of two fine books by promising authors. If they are any example of emerging talents that lay in store, let's hope there are many more to come.

**Peggy Blair,
The Beggar's Opera
(Penguin, 2012)**

Ottawa lawyer Peggy Blair makes her writing debut with a tale of a Canadian police detective who finds himself in over his head while on a vacation trip to Havana. Mike Ellis is having a week to remember: first his wife walks out on him, saying their marriage is over and taking all the money he had in his hotel room safe; then he goes out on the town in a drinking binge. The next day he's arrested for the sexual assault and murder of a young Cuban boy, a crime that carries the death penalty in present-day Cuba. It doesn't help that Ellis cannot remember anything of the night before, or that he is harbouring a terrible secret. A call to his chief back in Canada draws an Ottawa lawyer into taking the next plane to Cuba to help Ellis prove his innocence; it is a move that will put her life in jeopardy as well.

But Ellis is not the only one with problems; the head of the Major Crimes Unit, Inspector Ricardo Ramirez, is

faced with his own demons. He's seeing visions of the victims of past crimes he's investigated, and he suspects the apparitions may signal the onset of dementia, numbering his days with his beloved wife and family. As he moves to solve the homicide case in front of him, Ramirez struggles to make sense of his experiences: are the ghosts haunting his mind actually attempting to help him solve the case?



Populated with both believable and eccentric characters, *The Beggar's Opera* is also a nuanced account of the struggles of two men to comprehend

sudden and unexpected turns in their complex lives. Blair nicely strings the reader along, casting doubt on what's real and what's imaginary, while serving up a tale that combines a penetrating commentary on Cuban life with a whodunit full of twists and turns. The first of a projected series, readers can look forward to following the further exploits of the enigmatic Cuban police detective.

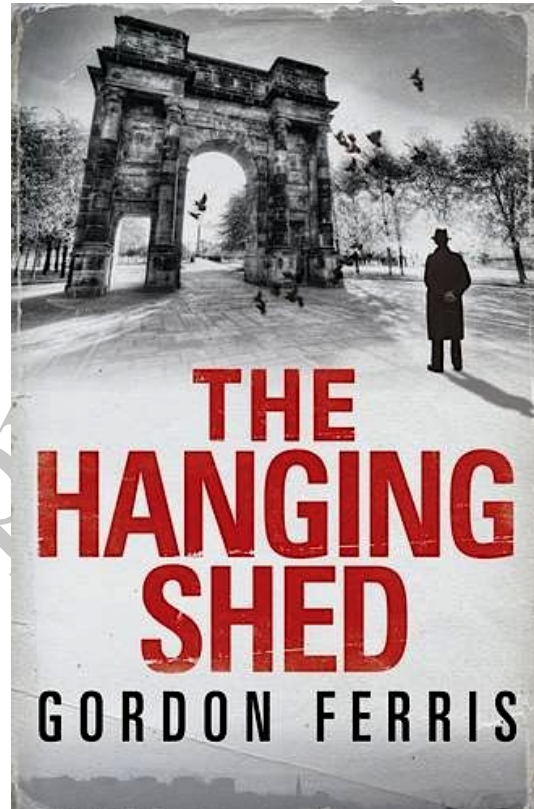
**Gordon Ferris,
The Hanging Shed
(McArthur & Co., 2011)**

Glasgow, 1946. Some ex-soldiers speak of having a "good war." For Douglas Brodie WWII was just such a war: armed with a university degree and experience as an ex-cop, Brodie had been commissioned as an officer, rising through the ranks and emerging from the conflict largely unscathed.

The same couldn't be said, however, for his childhood friend, Hugh Donovan. A tail gunner in the RAF, he'd sustained severe wounds and disfiguring burns when his bomber had been strafed. Now, only a few months after the end of the war, Donovan had returned to Glasgow to encounter a cruel twist of fate: he's been charged with the sexual assault and murder of his ex-girlfriend's young son, one of a series of recent child-abduction incidents. Physically repulsive, addicted to painkillers as a result of his wounds, and unable to account for his actions, he's the perfect suspect. In a city gripped by fear Donovan's conviction is not long in coming, and the gallows awaits him in only a few weeks' time. The only person who can help him is his old friend and ex-cop Dougie Brodie – from whom he'd stolen the same girlfriend

years earlier, when he and Dougie were both in their teens.

The evidence against Donovan is overwhelming, and Brodie sees little reason to help his former friend, until he's faced with a compelling reason: if Hugh is innocent, then there's some very sick person still out there, waiting to prey on other young boys.



Not quite a debut work (Ferris published two earlier thrillers, *Truth Dare Kill* and *The Unquiet Heart* in 2007 and 2008), *The Hanging Shed* nonetheless marks the beginning of a new series for the author, and is one of the strongest novels I've run across in a long time. Believable characters, a dark sense of humour, spot-on dialogue and a perfectly-paced narrative combine to make this a fine read to begin the year. Readers will be looking for more from this talented author; I know I will.

The Sherbrooke *Record*, Friday, January 13, 2012

With *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Hanging Shed* we have two very different takes, then, on a grimly familiar tale: the sexual assault and murder of a young boy and a suspect facing a mountain of damning evidence, unable to account for his actions at a critical time and fighting to prove his innocence. Set against very different backgrounds, each draws upon a strong sense of place to engage the reader, and each juxtaposes one man's plight against a troubled society with its own agenda. Both tales make for compelling reading.

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