

You *can* go home again *But then again, maybe you shouldn't...*

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

This week's review culminates the run-up to Canada's National Crime Writing Week (May 30th-June 5th) and the Arthur Ellis Awards for excellence in Canadian crime writing, which will take place in Toronto on June 5th. Together with the other writers I've looked at recently, this week's pick showcases the strength and variety of contemporary Canadian crime writing.

Michael Blair

Originally contemplating a career as a commercial artist, after seeing how badly such artists were treated Montreal-born Michael Blair decided to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. As he tells it, while waiting at home on leave he ran out of things to read and started writing a science fiction story. Following his discharge from the RCAF Michael began writing, his early efforts mostly notable for his acquiring a vast collection of rejection slips.

Michael began writing science fiction because that was mainly what his father had read to him as a child. However, in the late sixties he discovered Ross and John D. MacDonald, and after that Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Mickey Spillane, and Ed McBain. He was hooked. Not enjoying early success as a writer, Michael worked at a variety of jobs to support his writing habit. Happily, in 1994 he found his niche as a freelance technical writer and editor. To

date he has published four novels. These include his debut crime novel *If Looks Could Kill* (2001), *A Hard Winter Rain* (2004), *Overexposed* (2006), and *The Dells* (2007). A fifth novel, *Depth of Field*, is set on Toronto's Granville Island, and is slated to be released in December of this year.

The current president of Crime Writers of Canada, Michael lives in Montreal with his partner, graphic artist Pam Hilliard.



THE DELLS

A Joe Shoe Mystery

Michael Blair

A Castle Street **M**ystery

The Dells
(Castle Street Mysteries/Dundurn
Press, 2007)

What's worse than having a killer in your home town? Having a killer that you know. When ex-cop and PI Joe Schumacher ('Shoe' to his friends) makes a long-overdue visit to his boyhood home in the north Toronto suburb of Downsview, he gets a surprise: the police have taped off part of a wooded ravine known as the Dells, just behind his parents' house. Someone has been murdered there. A former neighbour and recluse who moved away decades earlier following a series of sexual assaults and the murder of a young girl, Marvin Cartwright had only recently returned to the area. It turned out to be an unfortunate move; he has been beaten to death with a tree limb.

Although he was only eleven at the time of the sexual assaults, Shoe recalls the events vividly, for two of the victims were close friends and another was one of his teachers. Although Cartwright had been a suspect in the cases, they had never been solved.

Now, it seems, someone is settling old scores. Everyone is under suspicion, including Shoe's friends, and a few enemies as well. His own family is troubled. His brother Hal, from whom Shoe has been estranged, is drinking heavily and acting strangely, and when Shoe tries to befriend Hal's wife, Maureen, Hal suspects them of having an affair.

The investigating officer, Hannah Lewis, turns out to be an old friend of Shoe's; as a cop, her elder brother had investigated the sexual assaults years earlier, and had bungled the case; Shoe had been instrumental in forcing his early retirement.

The police focus on one of Shoe's childhood friends, Joey Noseworthy, who was found in possession of Marvin Cartwright's chess set, and whose prints were on Cartwright's car. Shoe is not so sure. In their youth Joey had been a victim of bullying and physical attacks by several other boys, including his brother Hal; Shoe had attempted to even the score, and as a result, decades later old hostilities still lingered. It is a tale of desperation cascading into violence, and when the Dells claim yet another victim, what started in the woods will end in the woods.

Insightful and evocative

The Dells is nicely paced, with a fine sense of place and crisp dialogue. The writing flows effortlessly, alternating flashbacks from Shoe's youth with contemporary events. The crises of the nuanced characters, whether fumbling toward an adolescence full of posturing and bravado, or years later as mature figures full of self-doubt and failed ambitions, still coming to terms with their conflicted childhoods, will resonate with many readers. There is some graphic violence and explicit language, but it is always appropriate to the scene and the plot.

In the past few years Michael Blair has matured into one of Canada's most accomplished crime writers, with a confident hand and a strong voice. *The Dells* is an insightful and evocative tale, with a tone reminiscent of Harper Lee's classic, *To Kill A Mockingbird*; I recommend it highly.

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