

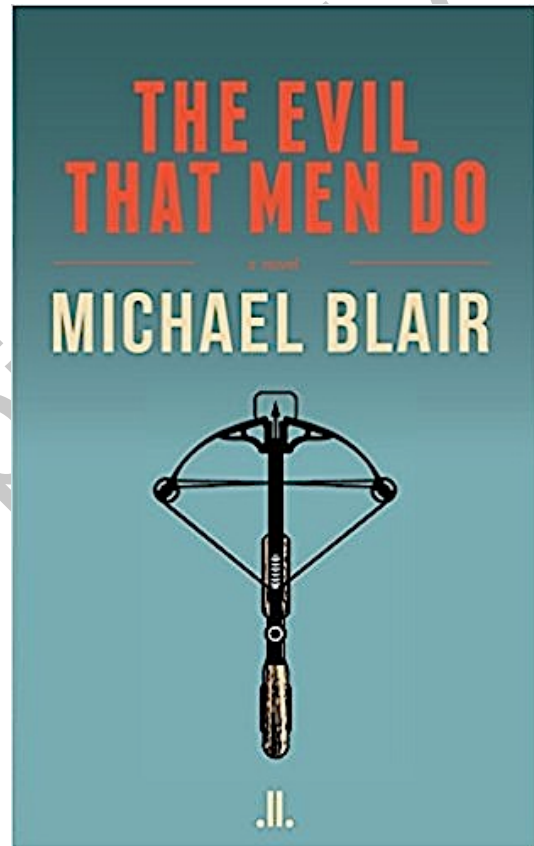
Tangled Webs: *Ponzi scheme triggers misery, violence*

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Atticus Caulfield Riley (his mother was an English teacher), known simply as Riley, has spent the past two decades knocking around the world in a variety of jobs—flying air-freight in the Australian outback, working for a marine salvage company in South Africa, and, for the past three years, co-managing a trekker's inn and pub in the Scottish Highlands. Now he's back in Quebec, at a hotel bar in Hudson, Quebec, a bedroom community west of Montreal, Quebec. He's there to hear a musical group—more specifically the lead singer, Nina Sparrow, whom he'd last seen four years earlier. Her look had changed, and she is launching a new album, but she is still Riley's virtual kid sister, or so he regards her.

As Nina finishes her song she approaches a table nearby. Riley is surprised to recognize the woman seated there: it's Tessa Jardine. Riley had lived with her for six months, twenty years ago. When Nina spots Riley they embrace, and Terry joins them. She introduces her daughter, Rebecca, and a burly friend, Lawrence Thomason.



It's said that you can't step in the same river twice, and Riley learns that a lot of water indeed has passed under the bridge since he left Montreal. Terry had married a suave businessman, Charles Pearson Brandt, who turned out to be a swindler. He'd raised a lot of money, mostly from the elderly, with the promise of pie-in-

the-sky returns on their investments. Before anyone caught on he'd absconded with over 50 million dollars, leaving Terry and the investors to pick up the pieces of their lives. Terry lost a lot, too, but the investors aren't buying that; they're harassing her and also taking her to court in an effort to recover at least part of their investments, but that doesn't stop some of them from taking their fury out on Terry.

It turns out that Riley himself is one of Brandt's victims – at least indirectly. He'd invested in a hi-tech start-up with his boyhood friend Gil Maxwell at the helm, and so far he hadn't seen a penny in return. It's important to Riley: his mother has Alzheimer's, and although she's being looked after by her niece Rocky, her condition is deteriorating, and soon she'll need to be placed in a nursing home. With his nest egg tied up in the struggling startup, Riley doesn't have the money to cover the costs, and he's desperate to avoid selling his mother's home.

So begins Riley's odyssey to trace Brandt and the 50 million dollars. In

part it's a favour for an old friend and ex-lover; in part it's for his mother; and in part it's because down deep Atticus Caulfield Riley is a decent man, and wants to help set things right for Brandt's many victims. But his efforts will put Riley on a collision course with others on the same quest who want the money for themselves. They're playing for keeps, and before it's over, people will disappear and someone will die.

I've been a strong admirer of Michael Blair's writing since the publication of *The Dells*, his first novel in the Joe Shoe series, in 2007. It's a fine novel, and ten years on, Blair has further polished his writing: Riley is an engaging character, with a penchant for wisecracks, an ability to roll with some very tough punches, and a strong sense of decency. Add to that the other characters, each original and convincing, and an atmosphere based on Blair's own informed knowledge of Montreal and its environs, and you have a well-paced, perfectly-plotted tale for our times, and Blair's strongest work to date.

Since 2005 more than 500 of 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, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, is scheduled to appear in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com