

# A killing in Cuba

## *Peggy Blair's sequel up to the mark*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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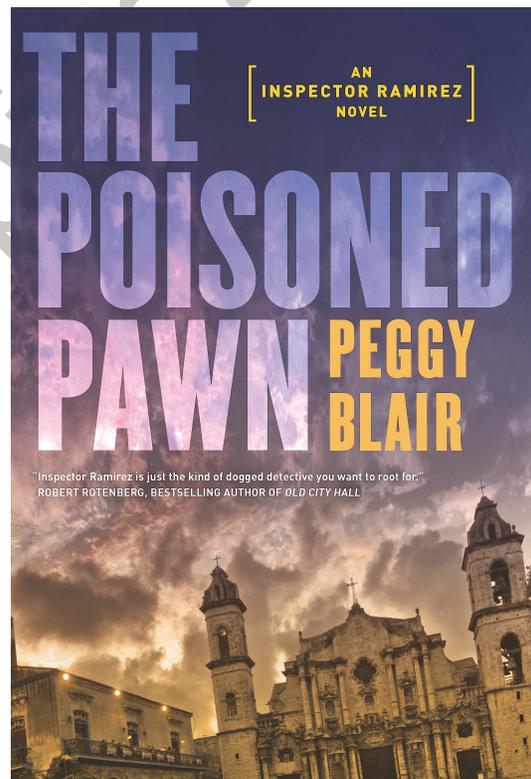
by Jim Napier

It's hard to imagine that it's been just over a year since Ottawa novelist Peggy Blair made her debut with *The Beggar's Opera*. A strong story with an open-ended plot, it drew on events taken from the headlines, juxtaposed against the complex and furtive backdrop of life in Castro's Cuba. Richly steeped in the atmosphere of Cuba, and featuring a diverse cast of characters, the book was a debut to remember.

Blair's latest effort, *The Poisoned Pawn*, picks up where her previous tale left off. Ottawa police detective Mike Ellis struggles with his wife Hillary's announcement that she is divorcing him. He's just returned to Canada from Cuba, and the plan is that she will follow him. But by the time the plane lands Hillary Ellis is dead from a mysterious toxin. Could her husband have engineered her death in a crime that gives him a perfect alibi?

The head of Cuba's Major Crimes Unit, Inspector Ricardo Ramirez, is a dedicated investigator who is often visited by the spectres of the

victims of his cases. His close friend, a diminutive pathologist named Hector Apiro, is confronted by a perplexing case. The body of an Afro-Cuban woman, Angela Aranas, has been found some ten



days after her death. She had been stabbed in the heart, and her ghostly visage haunts Ramirez, following him around as he investigates the case, glaring at him scornfully when he comes up blank.

When a Catholic priest, Rey Callendes, is found at the Ottawa Airport in possession of child pornography on his laptop, some of it concerning Cuban boys, Ramirez is handed a new brief: he is sent to Canada to escort the priest back to Cuba. Callendes claims he had been working for the Vatican, assembling evidence against abusive priests in Canada, but his own name comes up in a database of alleged sex offenders. Ramirez faces a number of difficulties: for starters, the supporting affidavit for his extradition contains important errors, masking information that the Cuban authorities would prefer to keep quiet. Moreover, the two nations do not have an extradition treaty, and the Canadian authorities will be reluctant to release the priest into Ramirez's custody since Cuba still has the death penalty.

Back in Canada Mike Ellis is informed of his wife's death, and learns that her family has had her body cremated. The decision is pivotal, for it precludes any possibility of forensically investigating the cause of her death. But it doesn't stop Hillary's mother from badgering the Rideau police chief, alleging that her son-in-law had murdered her daughter.

Meanwhile an aboriginal detective, Charlie Pike, is paired with Ramirez during his stay in Ottawa.

He is drawn to the native people who linger on the margins of urban society. He takes an interest in, then befriends, an elderly, drug-addicted man who lives on the street, aware that the old man's fate could as easily have been his own. It is a sympathy not unlike that Ramirez shares with the victims of the crimes he investigates.

When a second woman falls ill and dies in Havana, and then a third, both with symptoms similar to those suffered by Hillary Ellis, the investigation takes an ominous turn: could there be a dangerous toxin at work in Cuba, or has Mike Ellis figured out an ingenious way of deflecting suspicion from himself, by contaminating others? And the detective does have his secrets: lurking in the background are the dark events culminating in the death of his partner, Steve Sloan, secrets that Ellis is desperate to keep to himself.

Hard on the heels of her debut novel, Peggy Blair has fashioned a second gripping puzzle for readers, one like her first rooted in contemporary events, set against an informed depiction of life in Cuba and drawing on traditional folklore. Her layered and atmospheric tale will appeal to readers in search of a well-crafted read with inventive subplots, unique characters, and topical social themes.

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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, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at [jnapier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)

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