

Music and Murder *crime novel combines both*

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Too many crime novels these days are merely warmed-over treatments of tired plots. From the body-in-the-library cliché of village cozies to the graphic detail of forensic police procedurals (think CSI), writers all too often take refuge in the familiar, rather than extend the boundaries of mystery writing. This week's author is a welcome exception to that trend, and proves that all the good stories have not yet been told.

Rick Belchta

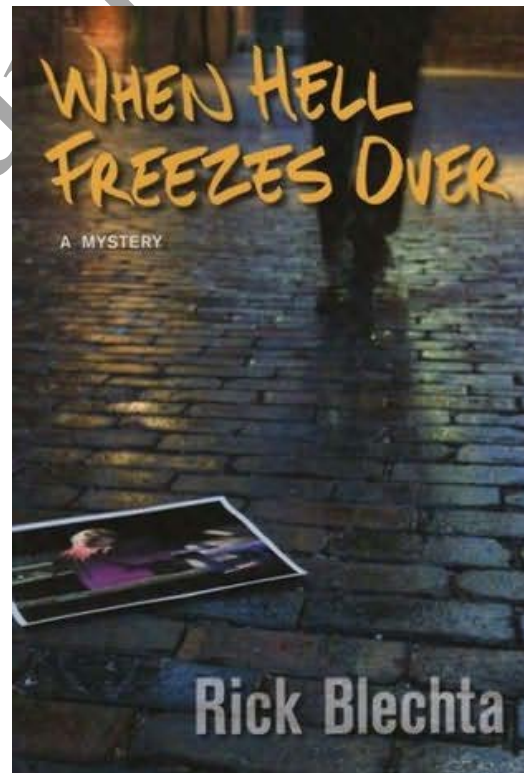
Rick is one of those intimidating (and, to the rest of us lesser mortals, disgusting) persons who is both multitalented *and* possesses seemingly unbounded amounts of energy. Born in New Rochelle, New York, he began playing with a rhythm and blues band when he was 14. He quickly became an accomplished performer on the keyboard, French horn, and trumpet, as well as developing his talents on the electric bass, percussion instruments, guitar and sax.

Emigrating to Canada in 1971, Rick completed his Bachelor of Music Degree at McGill University, then went on to form the Progressive Rock band *Devotion*. He rounded off his musical talent by teaching at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music for 16 years.

A talented graphic designer as well, Rick participates in the cover designs of his own books – a rarity for an author.

Currently President of the Crime Writers of Canada, Rick received the Derrick Murdoch Award for his contributions to the CWC over the years.

An excellent cook and gardener, as well as sports enthusiast, Rick is married to flutist and music teacher Vicki Belchta. They live in Toronto with their two sons.



When Hell Freezes Over
(RendezVous Crime, 2006)

Michael Quinn is a middle-aged ex-rock star who suddenly abandoned the stage at the height of his fame, due to a mysterious incident while the group was on tour. Decades later he runs a back-line musical instrument business in Toronto, providing musical gear for special events across the country. After revisiting his childhood home in Birmingham, Michael prepares to leave for rural Scotland, to visit an old friend, ex-band manager Angus MacDougall. But driving through the city he encounters a young woman, Regina Mastrocolle, trying to escape from a group of thugs in the early hours of the morning. She jumps into his borrowed car, begging him to help her escape. After the men inflict some heavy damage on the car, the two flee. She persuades Michael to take her with him to Scotland, where they take refuge. Michael's friend Angus surveys the car (it is his) and eventually welcomes them into his remote cottage. After Michael and Regina spend the night together Michael awakes early and takes a plane to Toronto, leaving Regina only a brief note.

Two days later Angus MacDougall is found dead by the Scottish police. He had been tortured, and his throat had been slit. It is obvious to Michael that it was the same men who had pursued Regina. The police question Michael closely, but wishing to keep her out of trouble, he is sparing with the truth.

It is not long before ex-band member Rolly Simpson calls Michael. He wants to stage a tribute to Angus, in the form of a one-time reunion of the band. Michael is suspicious: he is certain that

Rolly wants to resurrect the band and go on tour. But Michael can hardly refuse to join in the tribute without looking churlish, so he agrees. The media soon spread the word that the fabled band Neurotica will be staging a concert, and the publicity plays into the hands of Regina's pursuers. They track Michael down in Toronto, and he must balance his efforts to shake his pursuers, unravel Regina's tangled past to discover why they want her so desperately, and somehow manage to put together a concert of the band whose past harbours the secret of their breakup so many years ago.

His best to date

As noted above, Rick is very knowledgeable about music, and it shows: the musical thread of his plot is a major element: it adds depth to his tale and keeps the reader's interest. He also has an unerring eye for setting, which is skillfully woven into his storyline. Not least, his characters are entirely believable; we want to know what happens to them because we care, and because we care we are drawn to turn the page. With a fresh voice and a distinctively Canadian theme, *When Hell Freezes Over* is an original and enjoyable tale, and his best book to date.

When Hell Freezes Over is Rick Blechta's 5th crime novel. It was preceded by 2005's *Cemetery of the Nameless*, *Shooting Straight in the Dark*, *The Lark Ascending*, and his debut novel, *Knock on Wood*.

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