

Road Trips and Robberies

Knights-errant in the American Southwest

Suspended Sentences

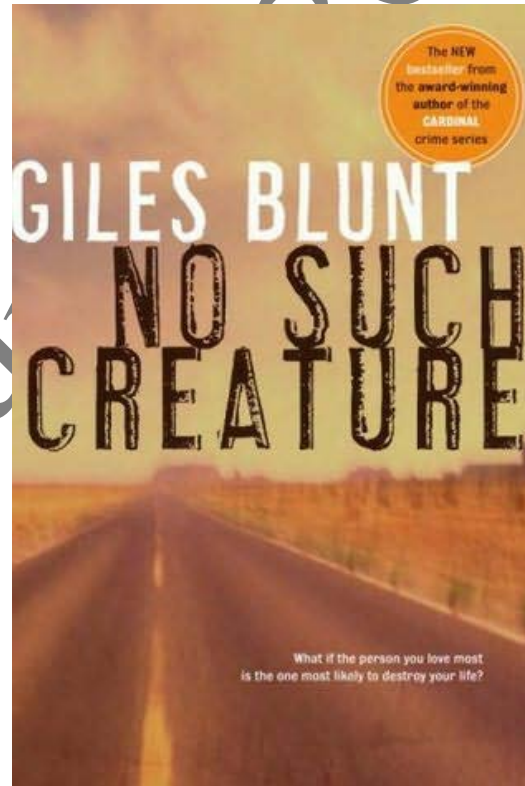
by Jim Napier

One of the more challenging forms of crime fiction unites crime capers with road stories. Think *Thelma and Louise*. Often combining gritty action with dark humour, the genre requires a talented hand to pull it off. Never to be under-taken lightly, it is all the more remarkable when an established and successful novelist with a string of award-winning mainstream crime novels to his credit suddenly shifts gears and serves up a standalone with larger-than-life characters in a fast-paced saga with comic undertones. Fortunately, this week's author is more than equal to the task.

Giles Blunt

Canadian author Giles Blunt will be familiar to many readers for his series of darkly atmospheric crime novels based in Northern Ontario, and featuring troubled native policeman John Cardinal. The first in the series, *Forty Words for Sorrow* won the British Crime Writers Silver Dagger Award, and was reviewed in this column in June of 2006. It was a disturbing story of two psychotic killers, and I suspect it stayed with many readers long after they put the book down. It was followed by *The Delicate Storm*, which earned Giles an Arthur Ellis Award, and *Blackfly Season*. His most recent John Cardinal novel, *By the Time You Read This*, was shortlisted for the prestigious Duncan Lawrie Gold Dagger.

Giles has also written for television, most notably for the highly-successful series *Law and Order*. After living in New York for twenty years he returned to Canada, and now makes his home in Toronto.



No Such Creature (Random House Canada, 2008)

In a tony residential neighbourhood north of San Francisco one evening, thieves rob a political fund-raiser. Relieving the assembled guests of their cash and valuables is as much a social cause as a source of income for these mismatched maniacs: in an effort to

achieve a sort of cosmic justice, they only rob wealthy Republicans.

And mismatched they are. The leader of the gang is a frustrated thespian. Max Maxwell is a Shakespeare-spouting senior citizen who views his criminal forays as opportunities to indulge his passion for wearing disguises and parading upon a grand stage. His partner in crime is his eighteen-year-old nephew Owen, who has been under Max's wing since his parents were killed in a car crash when he was ten. Owen is, as they say, learning the trade. But lately his job description has undergone a change: from merely accompanying Max and providing another set of eyes and ears and hands, Owen has found it necessary to cast a wary eye over his mentor, for lately Max has been losing it. There are telltale signs that Max is experiencing the early signs of dementia, and increasingly Owen is forced to improvise to save the situation.

Having pulled off their heist in California with characteristic aplomb, the pair separate from their accomplices and make their way toward Nevada in Max's aging RV, unaware that awaiting them is a gang of opportunists known as the Subtractors, whose vocation is relieving other thieves of their ill-gotten gains. Led by sadist Zig Zigler, the Subtractors have targeted Max and Owen for their next plunder.

In Las Vegas the situation is made more complex when a beautiful young waitress named Sabrina enters their lives. Owen is drawn to her like a moth to a flame. In a twist of fate it turns out she is the estranged daughter of a master thief John-Paul Bertrand, an old friend of Max's who is presently enjoying the State of Nevada's hospitality for an extended stay. Motivated by the desire

to help his old friend, Max attempts to reconcile father and daughter, with less than glittering results. For his part, Owen tries to intervene between Sabrina and her abusive boyfriend, but he soon finds himself overmatched, and Max is forced to come to his rescue. Fearing for her life, Sabrina takes refuge with the pair of unlikely knights-errant.

Pursued by Sabrina's boyfriend and Zigler's thugs the trio return to the road, separating more Republicans from their wealth along the way in Tucson before moving on to Dallas and, ultimately, New York. Along the way Owen will learn some important life lessons as his relationship with Sabrina develops, and he also struggles to cope with Max's fast-declining powers.

By the time they arrive in the Big Apple Max has set his mind on one last heist. It offers challenges they've never faced before. Owen's job is to keep Max—and himself—alive.

The perils of purloining

Deftly combining shifts of voice from Max and Owen to Zigler to Sabrina's obsessed boyfriend, the author keeps the pace lively and the suspense building. But even in the midst of dramatic action he spares a moment for a comedic interlude:

Max was still spinning around the floor with Evelyn del Rio. There was an abstracted air on his face that worried Owen... Max should have been collecting loot in a second bag, thus doubling their speed, but instead he was dancing with an opera star. Not good.

A couple of men glared as if they would take him apart, but the

rest were exceedingly cooperative...

‘I suppose you want credit cards too,’ said one fellow—he had a lot of freckles. He looked like the type of guy you’d enjoy tossing a Frisbee with.

“Just cash and jewellery,” Owen told him. “But thank you for asking.”

His protagonists implausible yet engaging, his villains by turns menacing and bumbling, Giles Blunt gives readers a light-hearted look at the perils of purloining combined with the aggravation of aging. A real departure from his darker writing, *No Such Creature* will earn Giles legions of new fans.

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