

In the library, with a candlestick

Rhys Bowen's latest novel a resounding hit

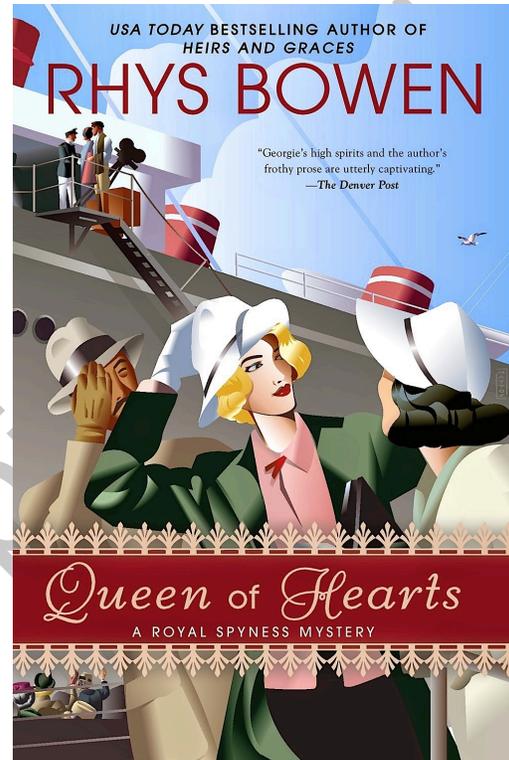
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Rhys Bowen has been entertaining crime fiction fans for decades. Beginning with her bucolic *Constable Evan Evans* stories set in rural Wales, followed by her *Molly Murphy* tales, set in a vibrant New York at the turn of the twentieth century, and most recently her *Royal Spyness* series, set mostly in Britain during the turbulent thirties, her signature style combines likeable characters and her own engaging humour.

The eighth in Bowen's popular *Royal Spyness* series, this outing finds Lady Georgina Rannoch, a penniless amateur sleuth who's a cousin to King George V, and thirty-fourth in line for the British throne, off to America. Her mother, an ex-actress Claire Daniels, is dead set on marrying her latest heartthrob, but first she must get a divorce from her present husband, and that means a trip to Reno, Nevada, with Georgie and her irrepressible lady's maid, Queenie Hepplewhite, in tow.

The cruise is not without incident. First Georgina encounters Algie Broxley-Foggett, a hapless minor aristocrat from England, on the ship. After a string of misadventures he's been disinherited by his exasperated



father, who's sent him packing to America to make something of himself. Then she witnesses what appears to be someone falling from the ship during the night. But the Atlantic is a large body of water, and search efforts come to nought. That event is followed by the discovery that her beau, Darcy O'Mara is on board; he's been sent by Scotland Yard to identify and arrest a notorious – and daring – jewel thief, only no one knows what he – or she – looks like. And not least Cy Goldman, a wealthy film producer on board, is

making a movie, and anxious for some genuine English talent, recruits Georgie's mother for a central role.

The group arrives safely in New York, and soon afterwards boards a train for Reno. But when Georgie and her mother arrive in Reno things begin to get really interesting. Sparks fly between her and the leading lady, who happens to be Cy's mistress. When Cy spots Georgie's beau, Darcy, he recruits him for a role as well, threatening the prospects for a young Spanish man, Juan de Castillo, whose thick Iberian accent is undermining his role in the movie.

Decamping to Cy's lavish estate outside Hollywood, things take a turn for the worse. Cy's wife shows up, understandably straining relations with his mistress; and Cy decides to drop the Spaniard from the film in favour of Darcy. Before long, things come to a head, literally: dare I say it?

Yes, the deed is done in the library, with a candlestick.

All in all, great fun, and with more than a nod and a wink to some well-known figures of the day. The humour is also vintage Bowen, from the engaging depiction of Georgie's lady's maid to her mother's outrageous antics, to the philandering film magnate with a sumptuous estate outside Hollywood, the tale is reminiscent of some of the great madcap comedies of the 30's. Depicting a vanished era, Bowen gets the manners and mores of the madcap thirties spot on, from the fashions of the day to the speech patterns of British aristocrats to Hollywood film tycoons to rural sheriffs dragged out in the dead of night — and all leavened by Bowen's trademark humour. *Queen of Hearts* is a welcome anodyne to the graphic thrillers that dominate much of crime fiction at the moment.

Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January magazine*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine* the *Montreal Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, <http://deadlydiversions.com/> He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com