

Debut with a difference

Fledgling novelist up for an Edgar Award

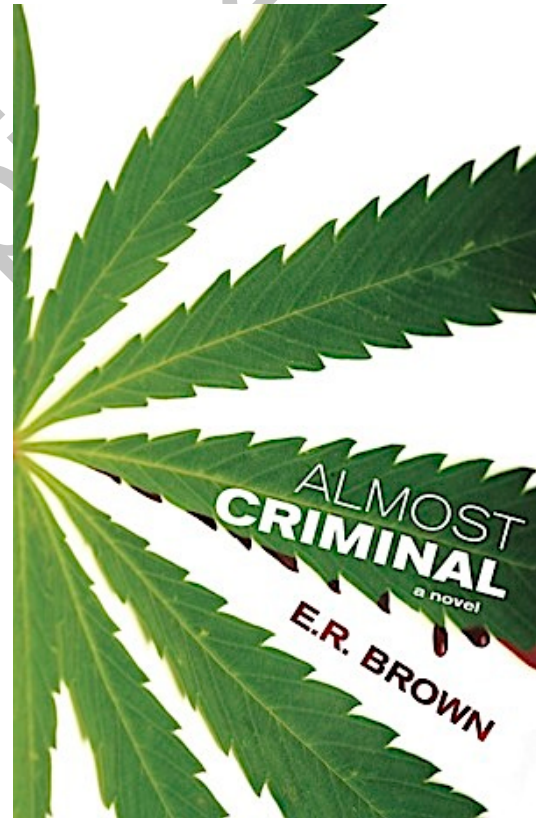
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Vancouver journalist E. R. Brown has struck gold with his recently-released first crime novel, *Almost Criminal*. Dealing with the, er, flowering marijuana industry in British Columbia, Brown offers readers the cautionary tale of a young man caught up in a clandestine business he doesn't fully understand, in a small town in the boonies. The result is a riveting, well-paced saga that holds the reader's interest as it builds toward an exciting conclusion.

Tate Maclean is a seventeen-year-old prodigy who garnered a university scholarship on the strength of his early promise. But that was before his mother Elsbeth came down with cancer and his grades went through the floor. Kicked out of university, he turned to looking after her and his younger sister, Bree. Beth is prone to manic episodes, and Tate has become the sole support of the family. Facing a dead-end existence he's working in the Fraser Valley town of Wallace, B.C., pulling lattes and espressos at a

local coffee bar to make ends meet. Like much of British Columbia the region is awash in counter-culture types, including aging draft-resisters from the Vietnam War living cheek by jowl



with bikers and an affluent younger crowd driving SUVs and sipping designer coffees to get their buzz. A drug by any other name.

One day Randle Kennedy, a customer at the coffee bar, asks Tate to deliver an envelope in exchange for a twenty-dollar tip; needing the money, he soon finds himself drawn into the shadowy world of the local pot industry. Kennedy is a charismatic figure who drives a bright yellow Porsche Speedster and lives in a gated waterfront retreat outside of town. Unknown to the Boys in Scarlet, at grow-ops across the Fraser Valley Kennedy produces a range of custom strains of pot for connoisseurs. Tate soon rationalizes his role in the business, convincing himself that no violence is involved, medicinal bud's already legal in several states, and that he is actually helping people like his mother, who get relief from some of the symptoms of their illnesses by smoking weed. No different, he's told, than drinking a single malt whisky. No one gets hurt.

That is, until the day Kennedy decides to expand his operations without telling some of his distributors, and things turn ugly. And complicating matters is a

dangerous secret Elsbeth has been hiding from her family.

While Tate searches for a way to extricate himself from the mess he's gotten himself into, Kennedy's ringleaders move to teach him a lesson he won't soon forget, and despite his best efforts, the seventeen-year-old Tate finds himself at the deep end of a very dark pool.

Well-researched and convincingly told, *Almost Criminal* is a revealing look at the dark world of the illicit pot business from the perspectives of grow-ops, distributors, users, and the gangs that lie behind them. The engaging protagonist is surrounded by believable supporting characters and the whole thing is wrapped in an entertaining plot. *Almost Criminal* is an impressive debut, evidenced by the fact that it has already been nominated for an Edgar Award for Best First Novel. It's always a joy to mark the appearance of a fresh voice on the crime-writing scene, and we hope for more good things from this talented writer.

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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, and the *Montreal Review of Books*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com