

Family Matters

New Ottawa-based series shines

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Northern Ontario, 1995: two young aboriginal girls run through the woods, trying desperately to escape from a sexual predator. Before long one person is dead, and the survivors must cope with the guilt of what they have done. It is a turning point that will define much of their lives.

Two decades later as Christmas approaches Ottawa businessman Tom Underwood is contemplating killing his wife Laurel. His private life is a shambles, and his working world is no better, defined by a partner, J. P. Belliveau and his useless and ambitious son-in-law, Max Oliver. His frustrations prove to be the least of his worries, however, as before long Underwood himself goes missing.

Native policewoman Kala Stonechild has just arrived in Ottawa. Formerly with the OPP in northern Ontario, she has come to Canada's capital to work with the Ottawa Police, on a team headed by Staff Sergeant Jacques Rouleau. Assigned to look into Tom Underwood's disappearance, she learns that he'd last been seen at a party the previous night, and the alarm had only been sounded when he missed two meetings – one especially important – the following

day. It isn't long before Underwood's body turns up: he'd been drugged and left in the trunk of his Mercedes, where he'd frozen to death.



As in all such cases, the investigation focuses on those closest to the victim. His business partner confirms that they'd been negotiating an important contract that was expected to bring their firm a huge windfall. A possible motive, then, as the profits would be shared among fewer people. But when they turn to his private life, Kala

and Rouleau really strike gold. Underwood's current marriage to Laurel is deeply resented by his ex-wife Pauline, his son Hunter hasn't spoken to him in years, his son-in-law Max Oliver despised Underwood for his treatment of those around him, and his pregnant daughter Geraldine is an ex-alcoholic who is clearly hiding something. How many ways can you spell dysfunctional?

Moreover, Kala and Rouleau's private lives are far short of idyllic. Kala has come to Ottawa on a personal quest, one that will take her into the seamy underbelly of the city's life; and Jacques Rouleau, separated from his wife Francis for the past sixteen years, although he still has strong feelings for her, grapples with the bitter news that she's been diagnosed with cancer, and has only a few months to

live. It is a bleak world, then, for all concerned.

Brenda Chapman has woven a complex and layered police procedural that moves back and forth between the investigation into Underwood's death and the poignant backstories of Kala Stonechild and Jacques Rouleau, which helps to give depth and nuance to her tale. Although there are some minor editing issues that do not materially affect the enjoyment of this book, *Cold Mourning* marks the promising beginning of a new series of stories built around complex yet engaging characters, and will appeal to fans of Barbara Fradkin's Ottawa-based Inspector Greene series.

Cold Mourning is published by Dundurn.

Originally published on the *Ottawa Review of Books*, September 30, 2015.

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 crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

