

Christmas Cozies

Holiday reading for the black at heart

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

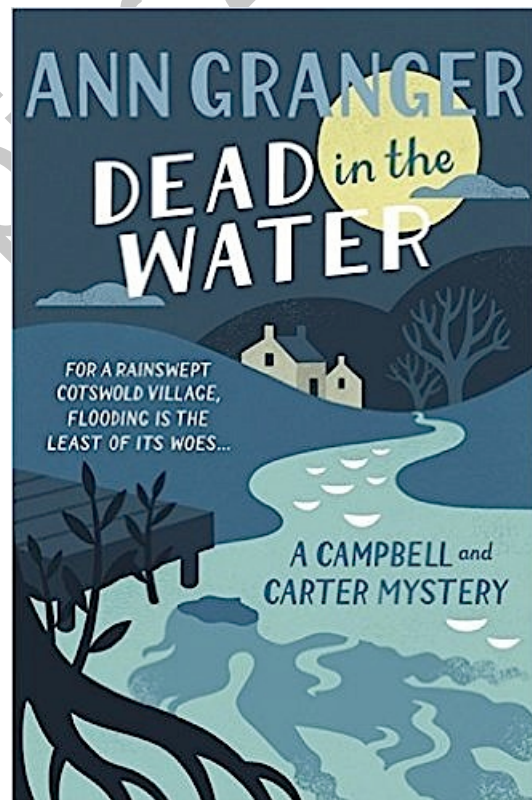
It's that time of year again, and readers who enjoy a little crime with their Christmas pudding can look forward to an onslaught of festive felonies, tales that feature mostly likeable characters caught up in some nefarious events, but with any violence mostly kept to a minimum or occurring off-stage, and capped by a satisfying ending. Here are four of the very best.

Ann Granger, *Dead in the Water*

Christmas in England isn't always white. Near the Cotswold village of Weston St. Ambrose it's frequently marked by rain and often by flooding. A local vet on his way to a call is dismayed to spot a body in a nearby swollen river, snagged by some branches near the bank. After retrieving his phone from his 4x4 to call the police, he returns to find the body has apparently loosened itself in the current and been swept down the river, out of sight.

When the police arrive and find nothing they wonder whether their witness is reliable. Nonetheless they decide to search downstream. They enter the grounds of a nearby cottage just in time to find the body. It has floated to a mooring on the river bank

and become wedged underneath, discovered by a local handyman who's come to deliver a load of firewood. The police retrieve it and determine it is a young woman, but they have as yet no idea of her identity.



The owners of the cottage, Neil and Beth Stewart, are understandably shocked. But after the police leave Beth is even more surprised to learn that Neil admits he recognizes the victim as Courtney Higson, a barmaid

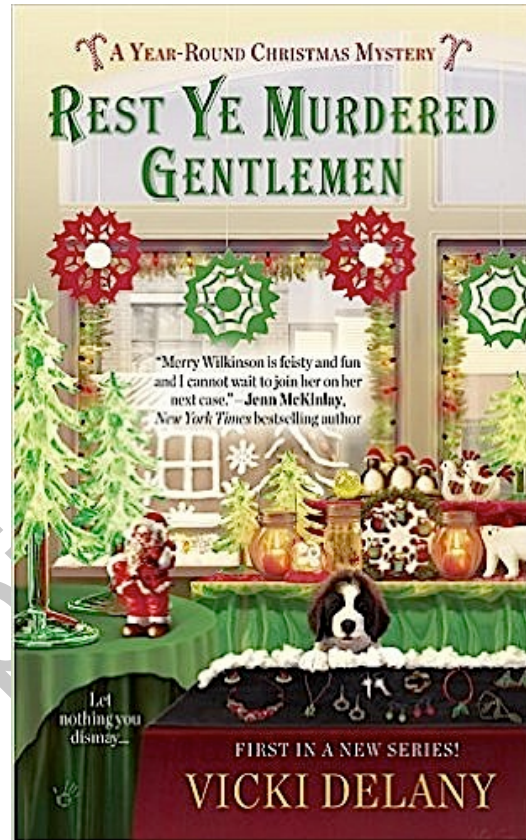
Vicki Delany, *Rest Ye Murdered Gentlemen*

at the Fisherman's Rest, a nearby pub. The fact that Stewart hadn't shared this information with the police initially leads his wife to wonder if there had been anything going on between them.

When what looked at first like an accidental drowning turns out to be murder, Inspector Jess Campbell and Superintendent Ian Carter ramp up the investigation, building a picture of the girl's personal life and compiling a list of suspects. When Stewart does finally decide to come clean, the police, too, are suspicious. He says he spent the day in London, meeting up with a friend for a drink, and not returning by train until late that evening. But he is rapidly becoming a person of interest in their inquiries.

The case takes on an added urgency when it's learned that Courtney's father, Teddy Higson, is a particularly vicious hoodlum. He's been granted early release from prison on compassionate grounds, and is in the area, actively searching for the person who killed his daughter. It doesn't bode well for the placid community.

Ann Granger has penned over thirty crime novels during the past twenty-five years. With a sub-plot that turns on the evolving personal relationship between Campbell and Carter, and wrapped around a traditional puzzle that has been updated for contemporary readers, *Dead in the Water* is a well-crafted enjoyable read that Dame Agatha herself would have been pleased to write.



In upstate New York the residents of Rudolph are looking forward to a prosperous Christmas season in their aptly-named town. Among their numbers Merry Wilkinson is counting on the season of good will to generate tidy profits for the town and for her shop, which specializes in – what else? – Christmas-themed ornaments and gifts.

But things are not going well. First, Merry's float in the Santa Claus parade is sabotaged. Then an influen-

tial travel magazine reporter who'd planned to give the town a big PR boost is found dead -- poisoned, it turns out, by a gingerbread cookie from the bakery of her best friend Vicky.

The throngs of visitors that the town depends on for its once-a-year shopping spree are beginning to dwindle, in part lured away by fear-mongering publicity from Muddle Harbor, a nearby community anxious to line its own coffers, and the merchants of Rudolph are beginning to panic: the B&Bs and hotels are reporting cancellations, the restaurants are sparsely populated, and the window-shoppers are light on the ground. But they say that bad things come in threes, and it's not long before the maxim is borne out: a sidewalk barbecue bursts into flame, sending the hapless chef to the hospital in full view of out-of-town shoppers. Will the good people of Rudolph find only lumps of coal in their stockings this year?

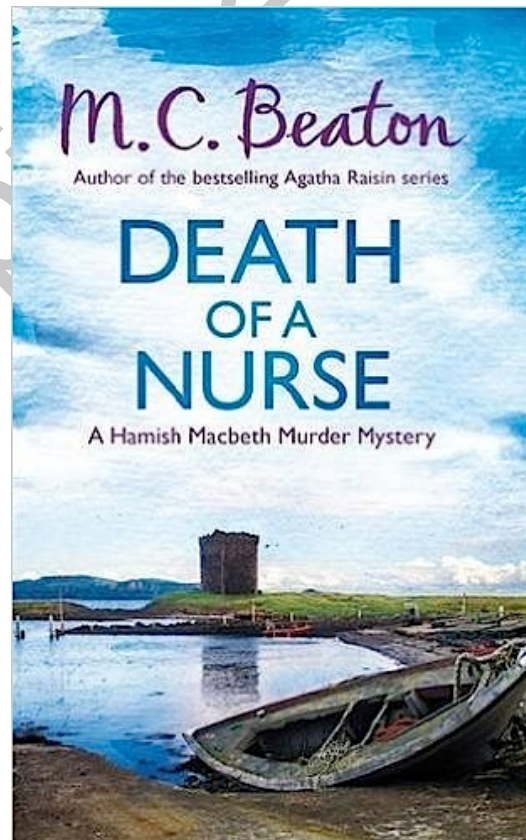
Rest Ye Murdered Gentlemen is the first of a projected series of year-round Christmas mysteries. Firmly in the cozy tradition, with (for the most part) likeable characters, it effectively captures the atmosphere of touristy small-towns in upstate New York. Readers in search of a light and entertaining tale suited to the season should enjoy Delany's latest work.

M. C. Beaton, ***Death of a Nurse***

It's approaching Christmas in the Scottish Highlands, and as usual the

tiny village of Lochdubh finds itself the focus of attention as yet another person becomes the victim of foul play.

It all begins innocently enough, when local police sergeant Hamish Macbeth encounters an attractive woman named Gloria Dainty, who's just been hired as a nurse for a reclusive old curmudgeon named Harrison. Hamish makes a dinner date with the young woman, but she doesn't show. When he inquires two days later, he's told she had left with her suitcase, and another nurse had



been engaged. A quick check revealed she hadn't taken a taxi, and given the remoteness of the house, Hamish reasons that she must have had someone waiting for her at the end of the drive. He lets the matter

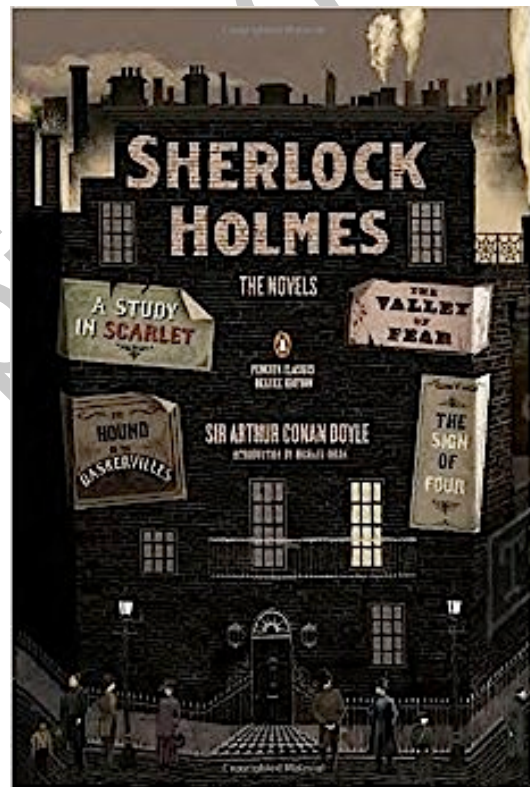
drop until the following day, when he and his constable Charlie Carter are out driving and Hamish spots a young boy playing with a cap. He recognizes it as part of the nurses' uniform, and a nearby search of the shoreline reveals the broken body of nurse Dainty on the rocks below the road. The pathologist reveals she'd been strangled before being thrown from the cliff. But who would murder a private nurse, and for what possible reason? Hamish must solve the crime whilst keeping his young constable out of trouble with a predatory superior officer, Inspector Fiona Herring, and contending with his nemesis, DCI Blair, who would like nothing better than to take the credit for Hamish's work while sending him off to a posting he doesn't want. Clearly, Hamish's work is cut out for him.

The *Hamish Macbeth* tales form one of the most engaging cozy crime series of recent times, and no wonder: they effectively combine a likeable protagonist supported by a quirky supporting cast of highland locals, the raw beauty of the Sutherland coast, and the inevitable sub-plot focusing on Hamish's ever-changing (and ill-fated) love life. Its popularity bolstered by the BBC television series featuring Robert Carlyle in the title role, author M. C. Beaton's work presently runs to over thirty Hamish Macbeth novels, and this latest one is fully up to the mark. For those who have not encountered her work before, Beaton is also the author of the camp *Agatha Raisin* series of over two dozen cozies set in the deliciously quaint Cotswold village of

Piddlebury. It's Miss Marple with an edge.

Sherlock Holmes: the novels

Saving the best for last. What can one say about the exploits of consulting detective Sherlock Holmes and his erstwhile companion and biographer, Dr. John Watson? Except, of course, that over a century after their creation they remain simply the best-known



pair of sleuths of all time, constantly imitated (though never equaled) through countless permutations, right up to the present day. Now, just in time for Christmas, the folks at Penguin have reissued a volume containing the four full-length novels of Holmes' adventures, which, together with the fifty-six short stories featuring the crime-fighting duo,

comprise the marvelous canon of Conan Doyle's iconic work. Included are *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Valley of Fear*, *The Sign of Four*, and, of course, that iconic thriller *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

And for the icing on the cake, the set includes an informed introduction by Michael Dirda, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the 2012 Edgar Award-winning study *On Conan Doyle*. Dirda suggests that these novels were the true crossovers of their day, incorporating such disparate elements as Gothic horror, romance, social realism, and ancient curses. Doyle also broke new ground in forging, in these tales, a new relationship among leading characters, Holmes saving Watson from going to seed and Watson, on his part, humanizing a great thinking machine.

All in all, Dirda is quite correct in his claim that the Holmes canon provides

"The best comfort literature in the world," and one cannot do better than to begin with Doyle's four classic novels. To be fair, none of these works can be fairly described as a cozy. Nor are they particularly about Christmas (for that, read Doyle's short story, "The Adventures of the Blue Carbuncle".) Yet, with the passage of time, these fine tales have earned a place (though a somewhat darker one) alongside such perennial classics as Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, Dylan Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, and O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi*. What better gift to oneself, then, than to reacquaint oneself with the imaginative tales that have inspired generations of readers and writers alike? So curl up with a cup of hot cocoa, a crackling fire, ignore the kids and office parties and indulge in a little Holmes for the holidays.

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

