

# Vicious Village

*Small town harbours death and deceit*

*Suspended Sentences*

by Jim Napier

This week's pick manages to combine a murder mystery with a penetrating look at the many ways in which a traditional culture has changed in recent decades, and the impact these changes have had on people's lives. It is a literate and charming tale that will both amuse and enlighten readers of all ages.

## *Jill Culiner*

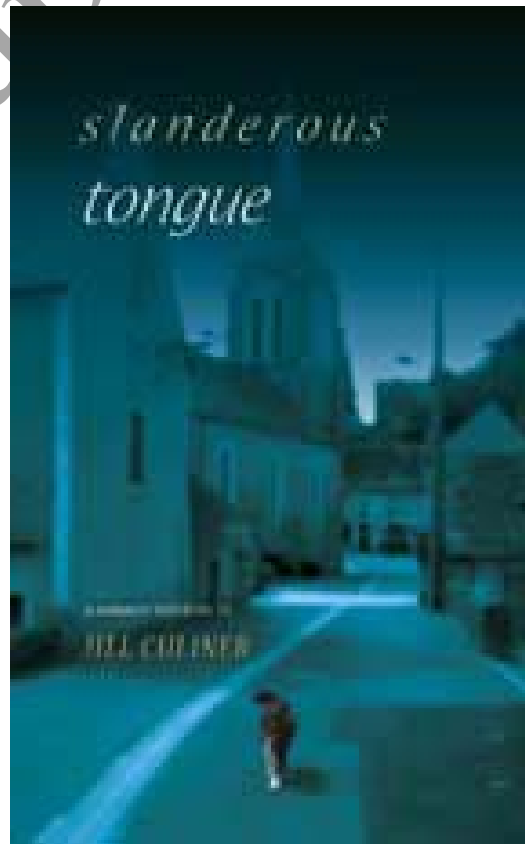
Jill Culiner began writing fiction at an early age. After a wide range of jobs she embarked on a career as an artist and photographer, exhibiting her work throughout Europe and in Canada. Her first novel, *Felicity's Power*, was published in Australia. In 2004 Sumach Press published her non-fiction work, *Finding Home: In the Footsteps of the Jewish Fusgeyers*, a prize-winning account of Romanian immigrants coming to Canada in 1900.

Jill and her dog Werewolf divide their time between Toronto and France.

## *Slanderous Tongue* (Sumach Press, 2007)

The narrator (she is unnamed) is a fifty-something amateur ethnologist, born in Canada but living in France. She has a cottage in the village of Epineux-le-Rainsouin, an unremarkable village where the way of life is rapidly disappearing. Composed of a mix of ancient buildings and more recently-built structures of concrete block and PVC

windows, the main square no longer looks out onto a variety of village shops; the dressmaker's, the hotel, the shoe shop, the grocer's, a restaurant, all have disappeared as the young people fled the village for more interesting towns and cities. What remains of the village—now simply a few houses with a small baker's shop—is presided over by the mayor, M. Lemasson, whose construction company is responsible for the tacky modern monstrosities that mar the beauty of the ancient village.



The townspeople, too, are composed of two types: those who have the internet, and the traditionalists, who rely on local observation for the gossip that defines their lives: in the words of the author, those with Windows, and those with windows. Each morning four ladies of a certain age gather to share coffee and to speculate about the goings-on of their neighbours. Like the village itself, the events they narrate are mostly unremarkable: the disappearance of some small change from a neighbour's house, attributed to the presence of "foreigners" in the insular village; the equally baffling disappearance of the baker's cat, giving rise to rumours of vivisection; the sighting of an unfamiliar white Renault driving through the village; and the rise in local housing prices, again attributed to the influx of foreigners.

The grist for the daily rumour mill is, then, in critically short supply until one of the townspeople suddenly disappears. Didier Blot is the village *garde champêtre*, a position dating back to the late eighteenth century. In essence the village civil service rolled up in one man, his job includes inspecting fields and fruit trees and chicken runs, cleaning the town gutters and streets, and supervising every type of commerce from fishing rights to the selling of postage stamps. Elderly shut-ins even rely on Didier to bring them their supply of eggs.

With such a wide range of responsibilities, the opportunity for graft and corruption are rife, and fuel the villager's speculation about the cause of his disappearance. When, a few days later, Didier is found dead of electrocution in his bathtub, the official account that he died by accident or even suicide (!) seems implausible to say the least. The villagers are used to the narrator

asking questions—collecting information about people's comings and goings is, after all, a large part of her occupation as an ethnologist—and it is not long before she uncovers several motives for Didier's demise. A compulsive womanizer, he was having affairs with several women in the village—some of them married. Then there was a dispute with the mayor, involving construction work awarded to his firm. Didier had strong views about the intensive farming techniques practised by local chicken farmers, and recently he'd had a sudden, violent rift with a couple he was closest to, resulting in the woman leaving her husband. There is, then, no shortage of explanations for Didier's death, and with the Mayor and the police disinclined to look further, it falls to the narrator to solve the crime.

### *A microcosm of village life*

Jill Culiner has a literate, yet informal style, with a good ear for dialogue and a sharp eye for the idiosyncrasies of rural village life. Despite her quirkiness in not giving a name to her protagonist, she had me hooked by the second page.

Not simply a mystery (though the author introduces several nicely-placed red herrings), *Slanderous Tongue* is an insightful study of the manners and mores of the inhabitants of a small town, with something to say on a variety of subjects. Culiner trains her lens backwards, to explore a microcosm of the human condition. She examines the minutæ of village life, the thousand and one details that, taken collectively, define people's relation to others and to the natural world around them. Focusing first on the physical changes in village life over decades, and their disruptive effects on social patterns, she turns her attention to intensive farming

techniques and their impact on the environment, and concludes with a critique of our willful ignorance of the inhumane treatment of the animals that most of us rely on for food. Although Culiner may be guilty of romanticising the past, she nonetheless paints the present as it is, warts and all.

Although she is occasionally preachy, Culiner is not wrong; and although she has an unhurried approach to the telling of her tale, when she gets where she's going the reader comes away both informed and entertained.

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