

Double Debut Delight

Two tales from first-time crime novelists

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

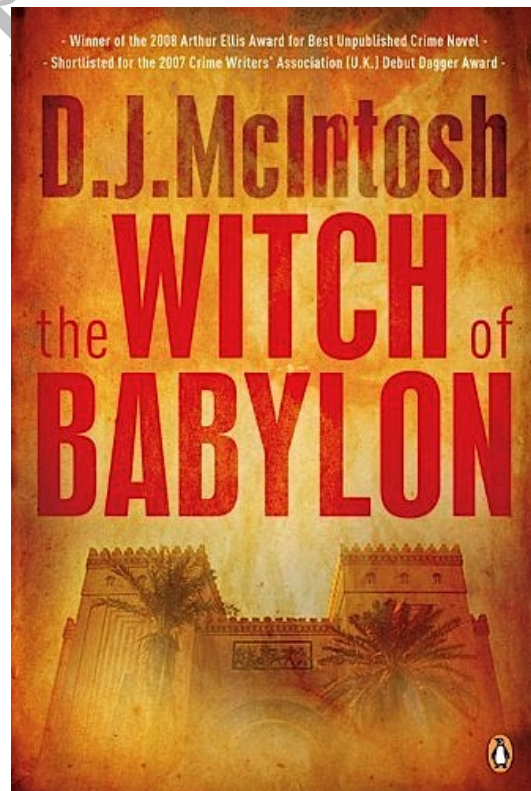
Canadian crime writing has been attracting a global readership for a long time. In the 1980s bestselling authors such as Howard Engel (the *Benny Cooperman* mysteries) and Eric Wright (*The Night The Gods Smiled*) introduced mystery fans to a distinctively Canadian world, and set the stage for such successful writers today as Maureen Jennings (*The Murdoch Mysteries*), Giles Blunt (The *John Cardinal* tales), Linwood Barclay and his standalone thrillers, and, of course, Louise Penny's bestselling and award-winning Quebec-based adventures featuring Chief Inspector Gamache.

Building on that tradition of excellence, two debut authors demonstrate that quality crime fiction is still very much alive and well in Canada. The addicts among us can only rejoice.

D. J. McIntosh,
The Witch of Babylon
(Penguin Canada, 2011)

Blame Steven Spielberg: he made archaeology look sexy. Intrepid heroes risking life and limb, caught up in the search for ancient tablets providing clues to the location of long-hidden treasures and secrets

concealed over millennia. A far cry, of course, from the more mundane reality of horn-rimmed academics marking off gridlines in the desert, patiently sifting the sands for a shard from an ancient pot. From fighting off Nazis for the Ark of the Covenant to running afoul of secret societies for a document that will blow the lid off the Catholic Church, there is a direct narrative line between the exploits of Indiana Jones and Robert Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*.



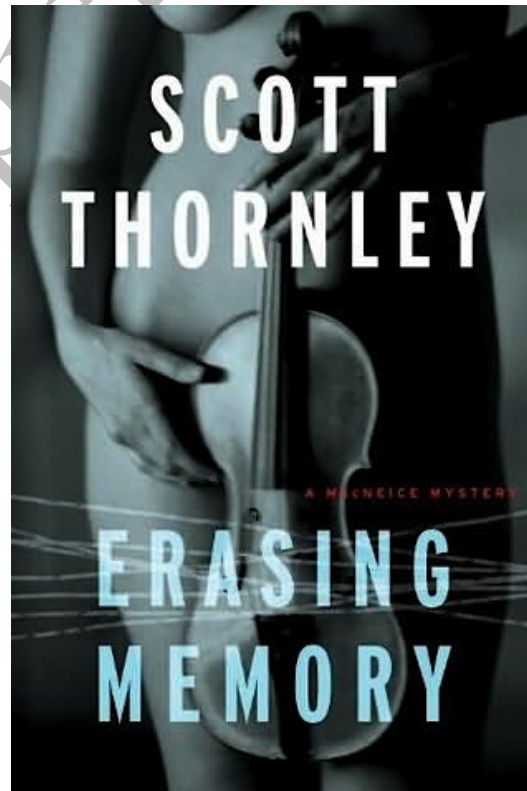
In the wake of such popular success

there has been a parade of aspiring authors looking to be the next Dan Brown. Most have been disappointing. But we can add another name to the growing list of authors mining this fertile subject, and a Canadian to boot: D. J. McIntosh was shortlisted for the British-based Crime Writers Association 2007 Debut Dagger for her manuscript, *The Witch of Babylon*. The following year she came away with the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Unpublished Novel, and Penguin Canada signed her to a three-book deal. Now, at long last, her debut novel has been published – and what a book it is. Building on the wholesale looting of antiquities that took place following the invasion of Baghdad during the First Gulf War, the story traces the quest for a lost treasure, an ancient tablet that might—or might not—contain the secret for turning basemetals into gold. Still recovering from a car crash in which he lost his antiquarian older brother, Turkish-American art dealer John Madison and a mysterious, though dangerous woman named Eris move from the sophisticated art world of Manhattan to the uncertain countryside of the Middle East in search of the priceless artifact.

An impressive debut

The first of a projected trilogy, *The Witch of Babylon* is a well-crafted novel that will appeal to readers in search of fast-paced action thrillers. Containing puzzles within puzzles, plot twists and complex characters, it will appeal to fans of *The Da Vinci*

Code – though in fairness it is much better written. A member of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies at the University of Toronto, McIntosh has delivered an informed, compelling account of the impact of war on a nation's cultural heritage, and the shadowy world of art dealers, where regard for international law takes a back seat to avarice and expediency. Rapidly garnering praise from leading crime writers, and with rights already sold in fifteen countries, *The Witch of Babylon* is well on track to become the Canadian crime thriller of the year, and marks an impressive debut for what is sure to be a successful writing career.



**Scott Thornley,
Erasing Memory
(Random House Canada, 2011)**

Toronto-based Scott Thornley is one of those gifted golden boys who seems to succeed at everything he turns his hand to. President and creative director of a major marketing firm, he has won over 150 international awards for design, and has been inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts. He has held exhibitions of his drawings and photography, and now, seeking to challenge himself further, Thornley has turned his hand to writing crime fiction. With what seems to be characteristic panache he has delivered a corker, a debut crime novel with an original plot, and well told in the bargain. It's not fair: no one person should have that much talent.

Dundurn, Ontario: having recently buried his wife, Detective Superintendent MacNeice is returning from visiting his wife's grave when he gets a call that takes him to a deserted beach cottage to examine a body. A young woman has been murdered, and her body arranged in what seems to be a tableau. This is no ordinary murder: the killer intended a message. Noticing a mark on her chin, MacNeice realizes she had been a violinist; his wife shared the very same mark, and he is drawn to the victim. But what makes the case bizarre, even macabre, is that the means of death involved destroying the woman's brain inside her skull – almost as if the intent was to erase any vestige of her memory. Who would do such a thing, and why?

MacNeice gathers his team around him and proceeds to unravel the

crime, beginning by identifying the victim. The trail leads to her father, an Eastern European dealer in furniture and rare documents. What unfolds is a layered tale of intrigue that stretches back in time and extends to the land of the father's birth and beyond. Before the case is ended others, both the guilty and the innocent, will be caught up in a spiraling vortex of violence.

***Holds the reader firmly
in his grasp***

Writing with a confident hand, Thornley deftly weaves an intricate blend of historical fact into a compelling tale of past transgressions catching up with the present. Combining believable characters with layered dialogue and nicely-paced action, he holds the reader firmly in his grasp until the closing pages in a captivating tale that will leave his readers queuing for the sequel.

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