

A Literate Mystery

Fesperman scores another hit

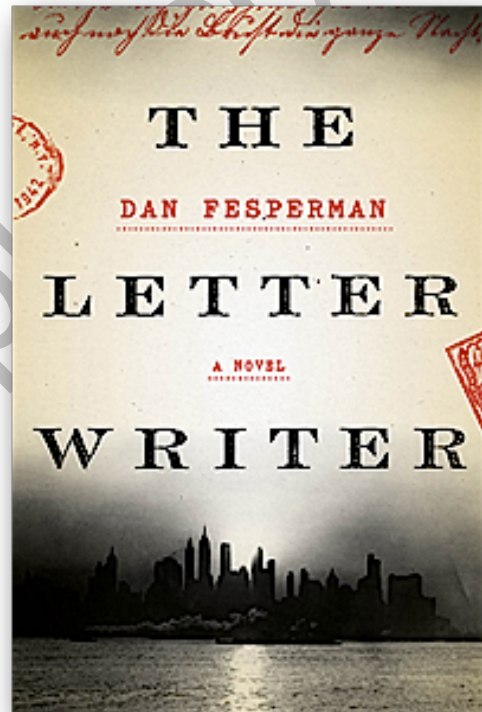
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

New York City, February, 1942: Woodrow Cain, a police detective from North Carolina arrives with a checkered past, his wife institutionalized for alcohol addiction, his twelve-year-old daughter left in the care of his sister, and rumors surrounding his involvement in two deaths back home — one of them a detective like him, and his best friend. But four months after Pearl Harbor experienced officers are in short supply, and Cain is hired as a detective by the NYPD.

His first assignment isn't long in coming. It involves a "floater" — cop jargon for a body — found in the Hudson River. The other detectives are blasé about the case, noting that they get as many as seven hundred river suicides every year. But Cain is sceptical; the man has cigarette burns on his chest, suggesting that his death might not have been all that voluntary. There is no ID on the body, only a ticket stub from an uptown movie theater and a small tattoo on the victim's

right shoulder, with the name Sabine.



New to the city, Cain has to learn New York as he works the case. With no name for the victim, Cain's next move is to begin with the theater stub. Predictably, that doesn't get him far. But Before long, however, he is approached by an elderly immigrant named Danzinger. The man is clearly well

educated, and speaks several languages. He has carved out a reputation in the Lower East Side as a letter writer—someone who can help other immigrants who are illiterate or who have limited language skills to read, and write, to their loved ones abroad. More importantly for Cain, he knows the identity of the man found floating in the Hudson River. He is Werner Hansche, and Danziger has been writing letters for him to Germany.

Trying to reconstruct Hansch's last few days, Cain follows up on the movie ticket found on his body; but he draws a blank at the theater. Cain is returning to the 14th Precinct on foot when a large car pulls up ahead of him. He's been summoned to Headquarters the following day, given a room number, and told to be on time. He's also warned not to mention the meeting to anyone at the station house. The next day when he arrives he's surprised to find that the Commissioner of Police, Lewis J. Valentine, is waiting for him. Valentine wastes no time coming to the point: He's been hired by Mayor La Guardia to reform the department, and he wants – make that demands – that Cain help him, by spying on his fellow detectives and reporting back to him directly. Cain is less than happy about the assignment, but as the new kid on the block, and an outsider to boot, he's the

logical choice. Besides, the matter is out of his hands.

Just to make his life complete, Cain is being pulled in yet another direction. Cain's father-in-law, Harris Euston is a powerful lawyer in the city with a major law firm to do his bidding. There's no love lost between Cain and Euston, who blames him for his daughter's addiction, and he'd like nothing better than to take Cain's daughter from him and bring her to New York City to live with her grandparents.

With two powerful men competing for his loyalty, Cain soon finds himself in his own uncharted waters, and must move carefully among fellow officers who distrust him, a father-in-law who arranged for his job and who seeks to control him for the sake of his granddaughter, and a range of the rich and powerful that extends from senior police officials to New York City's most ruthless gangsters. Bit by bit Cain's own troubled past is revealed, as he walks not one, but several tightropes in his desire to do his job while saving what remains of his private life.

For more than a decade journalist and novelist Dan Fesperman has been entertaining readers with finely crafted literary tales told from multiple points of view. His strength lies in basing his plots on historical events and figures, and

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weaving an engrossing storyline around them. The characters are well drawn and compelling, the details fastidiously researched, and

Fesperman holds readers firmly in his grip until the final pages. *The Letter Writer* is a fine crime novel, and a literary highlight of 2016.

Since 2005 more than 500 of 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*. His own crime novel is scheduled to appear in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



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