

# Festive Felonies

## *Holidays are meant for kicking back*

### Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

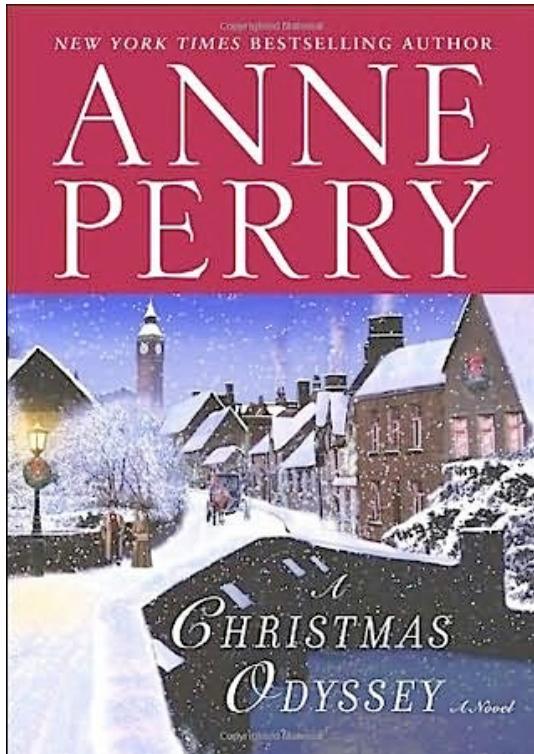
**A**fter the relatives have consumed the last morsel of the scrumptious Christmas dinner you laboured over for three days, the festivities have drawn to a close, and everyone has made their good-byes, that old devil post-Christmas *ennui* sets in. It was good to see the family, of course, but disappointingly, again this year there was no shiny red Ferrari parked in the driveway wrapped with a bow, and the three polyester ties you received will likely end up in a drawer, along with the pairs of socks that so fetchingly matched. Whoever thought orange and green went well together, anyway?

What to do? If you're a football or hockey fan the question is answered for you. Kicking back in front of the telly with some leftover egg nog and a third slice of Christmas cake is always an option, at least for those of us for whom health concerns are the rantings of spoilsports and fitness freaks, and to be firmly ignored. Hockey has no season, of course, and threatens to adopt a thirteen-month schedule; and football – that Other League, down south – is nicely building to a climax. But if spectator sports are not your thing, your choices must lie elsewhere: a bit of post-Christmas shopping, perhaps, to take advantage of the sales, or a concerted effort to clean out the closets. All not very inspiring.

But for those who enjoy reading, there's always a fall-back. Books, as they say,

are our friends, ready at our beck and call to transport us effortlessly (and at very little cost) to foreign lands or other times. They can amuse, enlighten, or instruct us, and perhaps most importantly, they can provide a much-needed balance to our lives, requiring as they do a bit of quiet calm for their full enjoyment.

Here, then, is a brief list of light Christmas readings that have but one thing in common: I speak, of course, of murder. But have no fear, these are all traditional mysteries, where the violence is kept to a minimum, or even occurs off-stage (so to speak), leaving the reader to enjoy the tale for its own sake. And if a sly, criminous smile overtakes your face, prompting those around you to ask what's so funny, you can simply raise your eyebrows fractionally and respond, 'Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.' It will drive them mad. So settle back in a comfortable armchair with your beverage of choice and one or more of the following tales, and enjoy the holiday season.

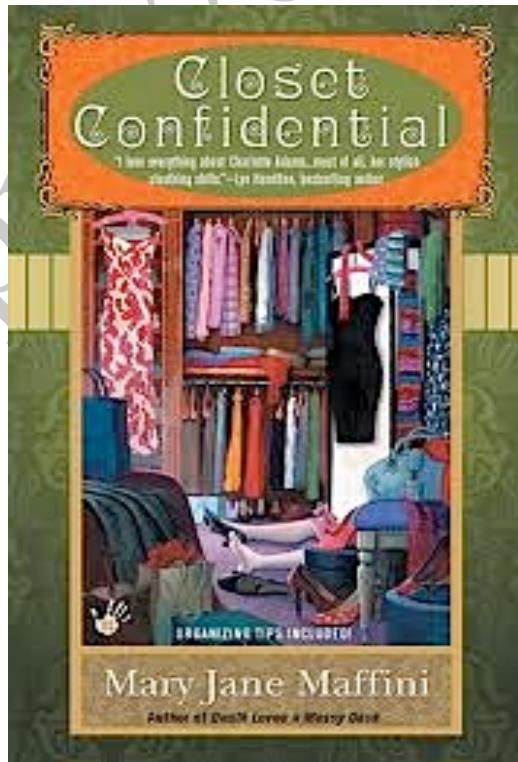


*Anne Perry,  
A Christmas Odyssey  
(Ballantine, 2010)*

Once again Anne Perry has served up a delightful Christmas treat with her latest tale of Victorian intrigue. When he learns that his son has fallen into a lifestyle of drugs and licentiousness, wealthy businessman James Wentworth enlists the help of his old friend Henry Rathbone to track him down and rescue him. Knowing little of underworld nightlife Rathbone forms an unlikely alliance with a reformed brothel-keeper, a slum doctor, and a beguiling girl, and together they venture into the back alleys and dark streets of London, encountering a seductive woman at the heart of the problem and the shadowy man who controls her. Moving toward a fiery climax, *A Christmas Odyssey* is vintage Perry, full of atmosphere, nicely paced and exquisitely told. As the song goes, have a Merry Perry Christmas!

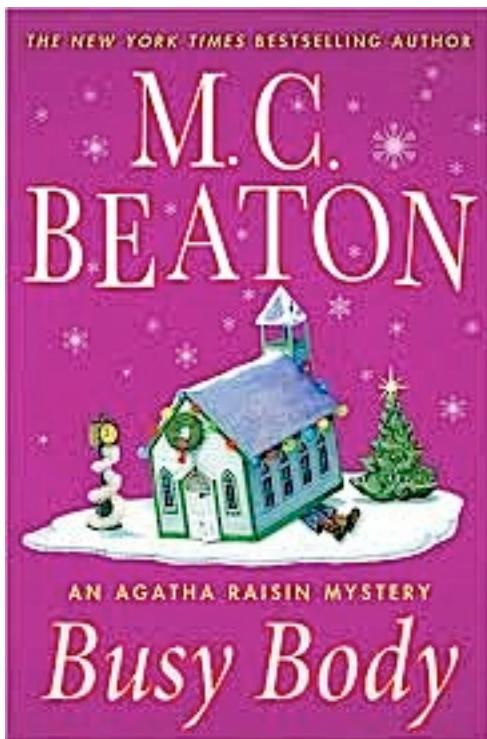
**Mary Jane Maffini,  
*Closet Confidential*  
(Berkley Prime Crime, 2010)**

The fourth in the series, *Closet Confidential* follows the exploits of professional home organizer Charlotte Adams as she tries to bring order to the apparently-perfect life of a professional model and old friend. The woman's daughter has recently drowned, and although everyone else – the police, her husband, and the victim's friends – are certain it was an accident, her mother is convinced it was murder. She urges Charlotte to look into her daughter's



death, and before long Charlotte finds herself raising questions of her own. But her efforts only widen the vortex of the conflict, drawing others into a confrontation with deadly consequences and showing that sometimes even the police cannot help. By turns witty, puzzling, and suspenseful, *Closet Confidential* lives up to Maffini's reputation as one of

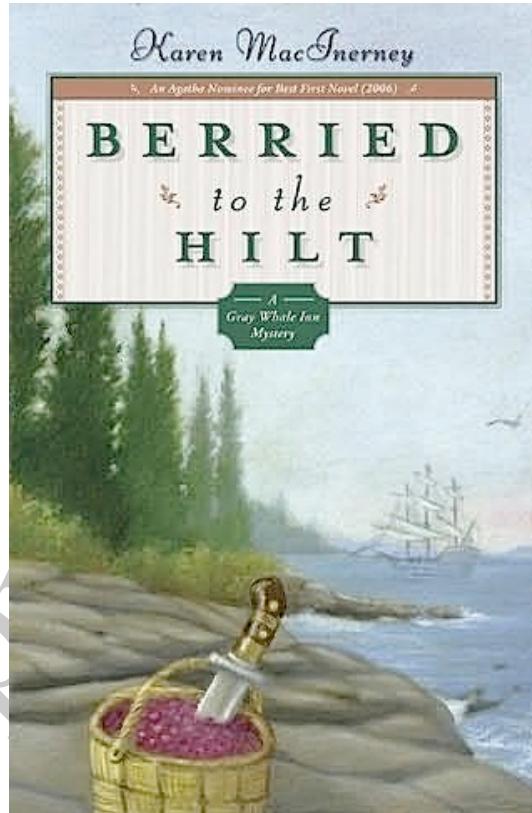
Canada's most entertaining crime writers.



**M. C. Beaton,  
*Busy Body*  
(Minotaur Books, 2010)**

Creator of the highly popular Agatha Raisin series of mystery tales, British author M. C. Beaton has penned nearly two dozen novels featuring the indefatigable private detective in the deceptively tranquil English village of Carsley. In her latest outing an officious and overbearing local bureaucrat has put a decided damper on Christmas festivities, ruling that the village decorations are unsafe, and even banning home-made toys as dangerous for children. The community comes together to deal with this threat to tradition, only to discover that someone has beat them to it: a kitchen knife is protruding from the pencil-pusher's body, and he will trouble them no more.

Still, murder is murder, and Agatha, not known for keeping her nose out of things, is determined to bring the killer to book, for no bad deed should go unpunished.



**Karen MacInerney,  
*Berried to the Hilt*  
(Midnight Ink, 2010)**

Nominated for an Agatha Award for her debut novel, *Murder on the Rocks*, Karen MacInerney has served up her fourth tale of intrigue set along the rocky coastline of Maine. Natalie Barnes is delighted to learn that apparently the remains of an old sailing ship have been located just off Cranberry Island, where she makes her home and runs a small inn. The find means that marine archeologists and others will soon descend on the island *en masse*, bringing her much-needed business. But when the university researchers are joined by salvage-seekers eager to claim the

wreckage for themselves, things turn tense; and when one of the newcomers is found murdered, the tiny island suddenly looks less like Valhalla and more like No Place to Hide. With most of the logical suspects residing under her roof, Natalie finds herself caught up in events, and very much in over her head, and getting out alive will test her skills to the breaking point.



## A Grave in the Cotswolds

Rebecca Tope

DEATH VISITS A SLEEPY COUNTRY VILLAGE



**Rebecca Tope**  
*A Grave in the Cotswolds*  
(Allison and Busby, 2010)

Cotswold undertaker Drew Slocombe makes a living – though just barely – by offering a unique service: his burial services are eco-friendly, featuring cardboard coffins, simple services, and burial sites located on private land. Notified of a client's death, he makes the necessary arrangements, and conducts the ceremony in the corner of a peaceful

field, as requested. Things take a turn for the worse however, when an official of the local planning authority turns up outraged and claiming the body must be moved, as the deceased didn't have title to the land! The scandal threatens Slocombe's already-fragile business, and matters only get worse when soon afterwards the local bureaucrat is found dead, and Slocombe is the prime suspect. Ninth in the series, *A Grave in the Cotswolds* is a highly original and entertaining tale by an accomplished writer.

So happy reading to all, and a Joyeux Noel!

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