

# Picking Up The Pieces

## *Is the victim also a killer?*

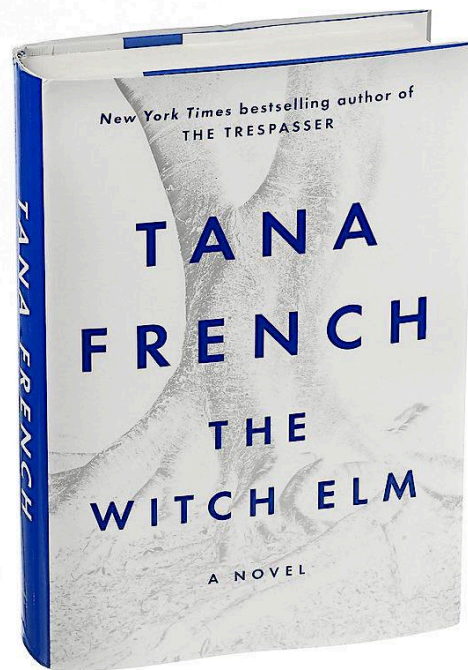
### *Suspended Sentences*

by Jim Napier

Toby Hennessy is a likeable twenty-eight-year-old Dubliner living the good life, working in PR and marketing for a prestigious art gallery. He is in a relationship with an adoring, intelligent young woman named Melissa, and surrounded by a network of friends going back to their youth. But when the work of an unknown young street artist hosted by the gallery turns out to be fraudulent, things begin to go pear-shaped for the young man. Fearful of the repercussions from exposure Toby engineers a cover-up, but his boss Richard discovers the ruse. He convinces Richard he can sort it, but before he can fate intervenes.

Toby is lying in bed, secure (or so he thinks) in his flat when, in the middle of the night, he hears a noise in the room beyond. Venturing out of his bedroom armed only with a wrought-iron candlestick, he surprises two burglars. They scuffle, but Toby is overmatched, and he suffers a massive beating, with severe injuries both to his body and his

head. Two days later he awakens to find himself in hospital, with little recollection of what happened and barely able to function.



He'd got by far the worst of the exchange, suffering four cracked ribs and a concussion. His balance is iffy, his coordination and speech impaired, and his memory of what happened fragmentary. After weeks in hospital he returns home to be ministered by Melissa, but he's far from recovered, not the least in his recollection of the events of that

fateful night. Two detectives visit him, but Toby is unable to give them a clear account of what happened, and still hasn't any idea why. They question him closely but compassionately, but he is able to give no motive for the burglary. Is it simply a coincidence, or is the assault connected with recent events at the gallery?

As Toby lies in hospital recovering, his thoughts turn to the nexus of friends who date back to his youth. But the casual closeness of the group masks important underlying tensions between them. There is envy and suspicion, along with secrets and slights, real or imagined, and over the following weeks these will rise to the surface, where their long friendships will be put to the test.

Flash forward two months, and Toby is only feeling marginally better. His body is slowly healing, but his memory has not improved. He is not only questioning what happened that night, but doubting himself as well. Anxious to put his apartment and its bleak memories behind him, he looks forward to moving, if only for a few months, to Ivy House, the domain of his uncle Hugo. But a door opened marks another door closing: Toby learns that Hugo has cancer and is dying. Determined to make the

most of things, Toby plans a reunion with his friends, who had often spent their summers at Ivy House. He invites them to return for a weekend visit. They do, and it seems, for a moment, that things are taking a turn for the better.

Until, that is, a human skull is discovered in the back yard.

Told in the first person, *The Witch Elm* is the latest engrossing psychological thriller to spring from the wholly original mind of Tana French. In this intriguing exploration of the human psyche, she forces readers to confront the issue of who we are, individually, and what we are capable of under extreme conditions. Like some of her earlier works *The Witch Elm* violates some cardinal rules of writing, but by doing so firmly holds readers in her grasp. It is a superb story, destined to become a classic.

Tana French is the author of *In the Woods*, *The Likeness*, *Faithful Place*, *Broken Harbor*, *The Secret Place*, and *The Trespasser*. Her books have won many awards, including the Edgar, Anthony, Macavity, and Barry awards, the Los Angeles Times Award for Best Mystery/Thriller, and the Irish Book Award for Crime Fiction. *The Witch Elm* is her latest novel.

§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, was published in 2017 and the next in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled to launch in the Spring of 2019. He can be reached at [jnapier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)

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