

Like Christmas in July

Fresh face a welcome surprise

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

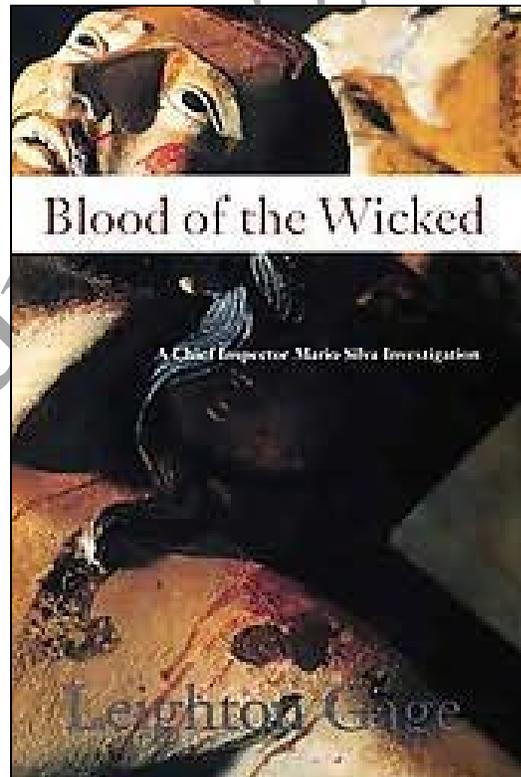
Crime fiction fans are an obsessive lot: each year they wait for the newest titles to emerge from a handful of favourite authors, and while away the time looking for new faces on the literary horizon. Unfortunately, there's a lot of dross out there, with journeymen writers raking over already-tired plots involving secret societies within the Vatican, vampires, and serial killers. So it's like Christmas in July when one stumbles across a new writer with an intriguing set of characters, an especially clever or original plot, and a real gift for writing.

This week's author has all that and more: he also has the ability to take readers into a darkly unfamiliar world and give them a real sense of what it would be like to live in conditions that we can barely imagine, and before his tale is over the reader will be changed by the experience. These are hallmarks of fine writing, and it is all the more satisfying when they come in a debut novel.

Leighton Gage

A man of many talents and extensive experience, Leighton Gage has lived in Australia, Europe and South America, and has somehow found the time to travel widely as well in Asia and Africa. In addition to acquiring skills in six languages, he has visited Spain during

Franco's reign, South Africa in the time of apartheid, Chile when it was under Pinochet's rule, Argentina during the regime of the Junta, and Yugoslavia



when Communism prevailed. His contributions in the advertising industry have garnered him over 130 awards for creative excellence, and he has been a featured speaker around the world. Recently he has turned his prodigious talent to writing full time, with predictable results: his debut novel has received both critical and popular

acclaim, and already Hollywood has plans to film his second novel, *Buried Strangers*, with a cast to include Tommy Lee Jones, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Ben Kingsley.

Gage has four daughters. He and his Brazilian wife spend part of each year in Santana do Paraiba, Brazil, and the balance of their time in Florida and the Netherlands.

Blood of the Wicked
(Soho Press, 2008)

While consecrating a new church in the Brazilian town of Cascatas, Bishop Dom Felipe is brutally assassinated by a sniper. The death is captured by a photographer in graphic detail, and the resulting public outrage of a man reputed to be on track to become a Cardinal prompts the Director of the Brazilian Federal Police to assign Chief Inspector Mario Silva to the case, with orders to get quick results.

Silva is a natural choice. In the 1970's, when he was a boy, Silva's father and mother had been robbed, and his father killed. His mother had also been raped by the thieves, and later committed suicide. The killers had never been identified, the only clue being a tattoo on the neck of one of the men.

Silva was determined to bring his parent's killers to justice. When he was old enough he joined the Federal Police, and before long his talents enabled him to train at the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. When he returned to Brazil he set up a computer database of identifying marks on known criminals. Little by little the database grew, and eventually it led Silva to his parent's killers. His reputation as an intelligent and resourceful officer also grew, and

over the years Silva emerged as the chief investigator for criminal affairs.

This case, however, will test Silva's talents. Brazil is a nation of sharp contrasts, none sharper than that between the affluent upper classes and the landless peasants. Often reduced to occupying unused farmland to eke out a precarious existence, the squatters have mounted a land-reform movement that threatens to shake the already unstable society to its knees. Wealthy land-owners employ every means at their disposal, including hired thugs and corrupt judges, to retain their privileges, and some priests have taken to publicly supporting the peasants in their claims to the land. The local head of the State police suggests that perhaps the Bishop had been caught up in the violence.

Silva and his nephew Hector, also a member of the Federal Police, navigate their way through the unfamiliar dirt streets of Cascatas in an effort to get to the bottom of things. They meet a local journalist working on an exposé of the conflict, who later disappears. They also speak with land-reformers who struggle to deal with the murders of the family of their leader. Perhaps most ominously, they soon learn that street kids are being murdered, their bodies showing evidence of ritual killings. Is Cascatas simply one of the many hell-holes of the Third World, or is there some common thread to these events?

Needs to be read

Once again the New York City-based Soho Press has delivered a winner. A welcome addition to the world of contemporary crime fiction, *Blood of the Wicked* is a finely-crafted work that shows none of the usual shortcomings of a first novel. Skillfully building on the

facts of life in Brazil today, Gage serves up a deeply disturbing story rich in atmosphere and setting, the characters all too plausible. The plot builds from the opening pages to its inevitable climax in an orgy of distrust, betrayal, and corruption that can only end tragically. The author does not spare the reader in his graphic descriptions of sex and violence, and rightly so, for it is a world unknown to most readers, and nothing short of his explicit language will do it justice. Blurring the distinction between literary fiction and crime fiction, this is a book that will inform readers, and needs to be read. Gage has done himself proud.

Jim Napier can be reached at
jim.napier52@gmail.com

© Jim Napier 2009