

Fact and fiction

weaving the two together

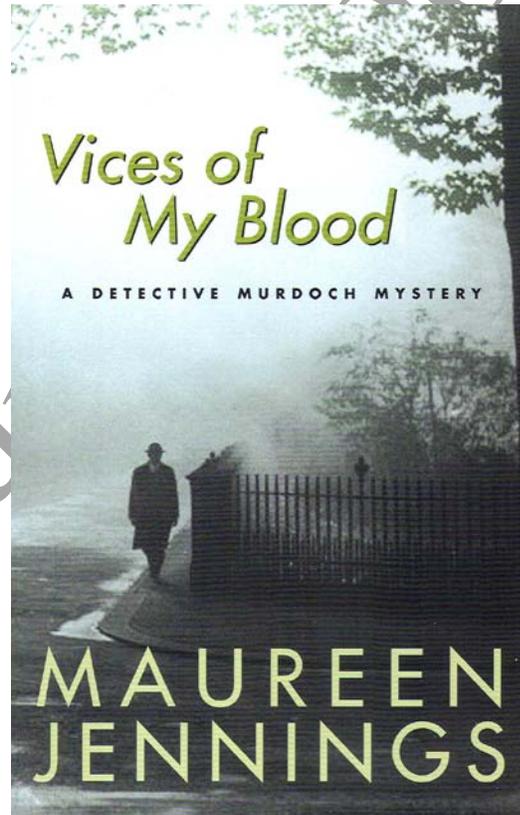
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Mystery fans owe a great debt to Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the fictional super-sleuth Sherlock Holmes. His novels and short stories have captivated, challenged, and entertained generations of readers, and the legendary exploits of this fictional character have, for many people, passed over into fact. After almost two hundred years after Holmes' first appearance in print, you can still lift a pint in the Sherlock Holmes Pub in London, or visit his (fictional) lodgings at 221B Baker Street. While in Toronto, you can visit Canada's premiere mystery bookstore, named – you guessed it – The Sleuth of Baker Street. Finally, you can, if so inclined, join the still-thriving society of the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of fans and scholars devoted to maintaining interest in what has come to be known as Sherlockiana. Clearly, the Master's influence is not waning.

However, it must be said that, largely because of Doyle's writings, contemporary readers tend to idealise many aspects of Victorian life. Asked to summarise the trappings of that complex era, we conjure up a world populated by fashionable women in voluminous satin dresses, topped by improbably extravagant hats, who, together with their financially-secure husbands are driven about in hansom cabs between prosperous townhouses in Belgravia Square.

We are, perhaps, less likely to take notice of the dismal, dreary lives led by



the vast majority of working-class Victorians, often living and labouring in conditions of appalling squalor for long hours and minimal wages, and with absolutely no security of employment. At any moment ordinary working people could find themselves on the street, forced to depend on the capricious charity of church groups and city poor houses. Driven by desperation, it is not surprising that many poor souls found

themselves slipping over the edge, joining the legions of prostitutes and pickpockets, beggars and con artists, and – more menacing – those who would slit a man’s throat for the price of a hot meal or a good pair of boots.

This week’s pick—in the running for Best Canadian Crime Novel of the Year—examines Canadian society under a cold light: the lodgings and workhouses of Victorian Toronto. Although a work of fiction, it invites us not only to consider life in that era so long ago, but also to reflect on our attitudes toward those less fortunate today.

Maureen Jennings

Born in Birmingham, England, Maureen emigrated to Canada with her mother at the age of 17. She completed her BA degree in philosophy and psychology at the University of Windsor, and went on to do a Master’s in English Literature at the University of Toronto. After teaching English at Ryerson for several years, Maureen left to enter private practise as a psychotherapist, complementing her work conducting creative expression groups.

Having had her plays produced beginning in 1990, Maureen published her debut novel in the William Murdoch series, *Except the Dying*, in 1997. It was shortlisted for both the Anthony and Arthur Ellis awards for Best First novel, and has been followed by six more novels in the series, three of which have been nominated for multiple awards. The first three novels have been broadcast as made-for-TV movies, and Bravo/CHUM are currently filming the subsequent novels as a 13-part television series starring Peter Outerbridge, Keeley Hawes, and Colm Meaney. The series is

being broadcast in Asia, the UK, and Europe, as well as in Canada, and several actors have been nominated for, or have received, Gemini Awards for their performances. Heady stuff indeed, for a Canadian writer, and deservedly so.

Maureen lives in Toronto with her two dogs, one a border collie, fittingly (given her interest in Victorian mysteries) named Jeremy-Brett.

***Vices of My Blood* (McClelland and Stewart, 2006)**

Toronto in the 1890s: those people fortunate enough to have gainful employment enjoy the fruits of the Industrial Revolution. Those less fortunate—including the infirm and the unemployed—must depend on the charity of civic and church groups in order to survive.

But charity has its limits. Applicants for a free meal or a bed at the aptly-named House of Industry are vetted by Visitors, as they are known, who interview applicants in their homes in an effort to separate the drunkards and malingerers from those judged to be truly deserving. When one such Visitor, the Reverend Charles Howard, is found stabbed to death in his church, his boots missing, suspicion naturally falls on the impoverished people he had been interviewing. Turning down desperate people is certain to cause resentment; did the Reverend’s rejection of someone’s claim bring about his death, or is there a more sinister explanation?

Toronto detective William Murdoch is assigned the case, and is pressured by his superior, Inspector Breckenreid, to bring it to a speedy conclusion, for the brutal murder of a respected clergyman is seen by his superior as an assault on the very core of Victorian society.

Murdoch's quest will require him to assume a false identity and enter the shadowy world of the Victorian underclass, where he will meet prostitutes and con artists, mingle with the destitute and the desperate, and innocent people will be put at risk before the killer is brought to book. Murdoch will also wrestle with remorse over the loss of his fiancée to typhoid fever, and struggle to move on.

Richly rewarding

The sixth in the William Murdoch series, *Vices of My Blood* is a rich and rewarding book. Maureen Jennings has a

keen eye for setting, character, and dialogue, which above all are crucial to writing an historical novel. She demonstrates that even in the more egalitarian climate of Canada, the class and cultural attitudes that marked Victorian society persisted, often with tragic results. The best fiction informs as well as entertains; by that standard, *Vices of My Blood* is a fine read.

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