

None Better

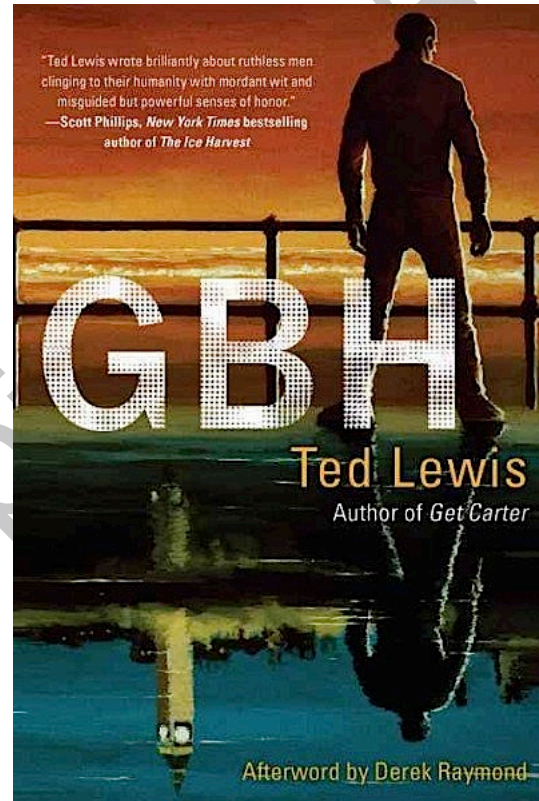
Soho Crime reissues noir classic

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Best known for creating what became the Jack Carter series of tales in the 1970s, British author Ted Lewis penned a total of nine novels until his death from alcohol abuse at the age of forty-two. His stories are taut, spare portrayals of anti-heroes caught up in a web of violence. None is better than *Jack's Return Home*, made famous as the iconic Michael Caine film *Get Carter*; but Lewis's final novel, *GBH*, is quite simply a noir masterpiece, a stunningly-written case study in the importance of structure, style, and voice to the telling of a tale. Reissued in 2015 by Soho Crime, and furnished with an informed afterword by Derek Raymond, it is a timeless gem and belongs in the very top tier of noir fiction.

It's the late 1970s, and London baddie George Fowler heads a well-organised and profitable criminal syndicate that produces what were called in the day "blue films" — illegal pornography. Across the country his business takes in over a million quid a year, but recently someone within the



organization has been fouling Fowler's nest, skimming his profits and jeopardizing his control. As he seeks out the traitor he begins to doubt everyone around him, even his closest allies. Suspicion poisons the atmosphere, and Fowler is forced to retreat to a secluded getaway in Northern England to rethink his situation. When a beguiling young singer appears on the scene Fowler allows her into

his life. It is a decision that they will both have cause to regret.

Anglophiles will recognize that GBH is a British term, legalise for the criminal infraction of inflicting Grievous Bodily Harm. And there is no shortage of examples in Lewis's story. But even though the opening lines contain no explicit violence, we know what we are in for:

A dry light wind ripples softly across the coastal plain, murmuring round the bungalow's corners, bound for the sand dunes and the shuddering brittle grass.

From the bed I stare through the window and watch some shreds of clouds pass luminously across the face of the moon. The clouds move on and the moon is solitary once more, its brilliance sharply defining the bedroom's details. A mile away, the sea is subdued as it tumbles on to the flat, hard beach. I look at my watch. It is a quarter to three.

I pick up the handgun off the bedside table and get up off the bed and walk...into the large, bare...hall... I walk towards the front door, my approach causing the moonlight to ripple beyond the frosted glass.

Only a few pages later the gloves come off, so to speak:

Mickey taped Arthur's mouth shut with some gauze and plaster.

'We'll give it a go with the gag a couple of times, Arthur,' said Mickey Brice. 'You'll scream, and you'll want us to take it off so we'll be able to hear you scream and tell Mr. Fowler what he wants to know. But we won't do that at first. Like I say, we'll give it a couple or three goes so you can get used to it.'

Mickey took his gloves from his pocket and put them on, then gathered the dangling wires to him, taking hold of them not quite at their naked ends. I was suddenly conscious of Jean's perfume as she moved very quietly to stand by my side. Now the games were over.

Told in riveting first-person, present tense, Lewis's dark tale moves back and forth in time and place, the place either described simply as "The Smoke" (London) or "The Sea (Fowler's hideaway on the English Coast). The dark storyline is punctuated by Lewis's bleak narrative and crackling dialogue, the plot full of foreboding, the climax an orgy of violence. And when you finally put the book down, you'll need a breather. They simply don't get any better than that.

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§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*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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