

A Real Treat

New mystery from a seasoned veteran

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Most mystery fans would say I have an enviable job. Each week I receive a stack new mystery novels—for free. I get to read them (which I would often do anyway), and I get paid for writing about them. What's not to like?

Alas, if it were only so. The truth is, the books that make it into this column represent only a small fraction of those I receive. Many don't make it into these pages because they're simply not mysteries: long on gore and short on plot, I have no interest in reviewing them—and judging by my reader's comments, neither do you. Others (too many, I'm afraid) offer the promise of a good tale, but are marred by predictable plotting, poor writing, and all too often, careless editing. They too are consigned to the slush pile. Those that make it into these pages must have something going for them. Happily, this week's pick is an exception to those trends: it is a readable and entertaining book with a challenging puzzle, but without gratuitous violence, overworked clichés, or improbable plot devices. And that's what keeps me going: knowing that the very next parcel that comes across my doorstep might well contain another gem. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

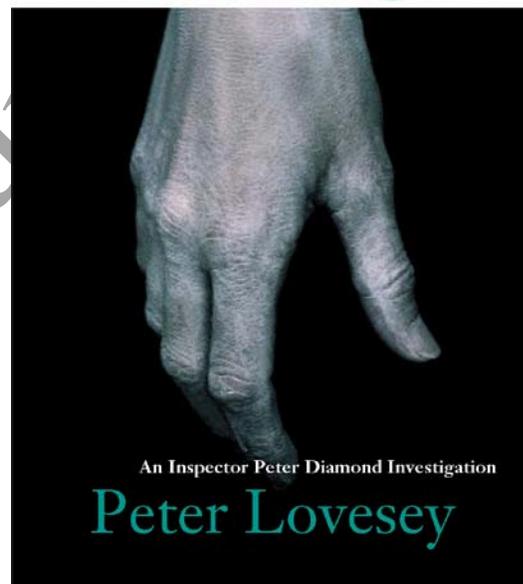
Peter Lovesey

Beginning with a career in higher education, Peter Lovesey switched to

writing fiction full-time with the publication in 1970 of *Wobble to Death*, a mystery set in Victorian London. The book spawned seven more novels featuring the quietly tenacious Detective



The Secret Hangman



Sergeant Cribb, as well as two television series. Lovesey went on to pen a highly entertaining series of pastiche mysteries featuring none other than Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, in the unlikely role of crime-fighting sleuth. Imagine the portly Royal following someone down Regent Street in London, attempting to remain inconspicuous, and you get the idea.

Although wide-ranging in their subjects and settings, Lovesey's books are all marked by original characters, clever plots, and a gentle humour. A brief selection of his best would have to include *The Detective Wore Silk Drawers*, *Invitation to a Dynamite Party*, *Bertie and the Tinman*, *The False Inspector Dew*, *Swing, Swing, Together*, *Rough Cider*, and my personal favourite, the cunningly (and punningly) titled, *Abracadaver*. He has received numerous awards for his writing, including three Silver Daggers, awarded by the British Crime Writers Association, a Gold Dagger awarded in 1982, and the 2000 Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime contribution to the genre of mystery and crime fiction.

Lovesey's 26 novels (plus three more under his pen name of Peter Lear) and four collections of short stories have been translated into 22 languages. *The Secret Hangman* is the tenth novel featuring Bath detective Peter Diamond.

Peter Lovesey and his wife live near Chichester, in West Sussex, England.

The Secret Hangman **(Soho Crime, 2007)**

Detective Superintendent Peter Diamond is a senior CID officer working out of Bath, England, a city renowned for its Roman Spa and the Royal Crescent, a collection of fine terraced homes designed in neoclassical style by John Wood in the late 18th century. Normally a sedate community, the residents are jarred from their tranquility by the appearance of a serial killer in their midst: someone is dispatching couples by hanging them in very public places and making their deaths appear to be suicides. But the perpetrator is not your everyday, garden-variety killer, simply

getting his jollies by offing his neighbours; he is a man with a mission, and it falls to Diamond to discover what drives this maniac before he adds another victim to his list. Life is never simple, though, and as he pursues the killer, Diamond finds that he himself is being stalked – by another person with quite a different motive. He is assisted in his labours by Detective Inspector Keith Halliwell, and by a new member of the team, DC Ingeborg Smith, an ex-journalist turned cop. Adding to his troubles, Diamond must contend with his domineering boss, Assistant Chief Constable Georgina Dallymore. Finally, as a new woman enters his personal life, Diamond must wrestle with his own private demons concerning his late wife, who died from cancer.

A breath of fresh air

A seasoned veteran of crime writing, Peter Lovesey excels in constructing original tales with cleverly crafted plots, and *The Secret Hangman* is no exception. Like his creator, Diamond is a gentleman of the old school, though he can summon a biting wit when the occasion requires. The violence in the story is peripheral; the puzzle is primary, and there are some nice sub-plots and surprises in store. In a genre where graphic violence, mindless action, and mediocre writing seem to be becoming the norm, *The Secret Hangman* is a breath of fresh air.

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