

Digging Up the Past

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

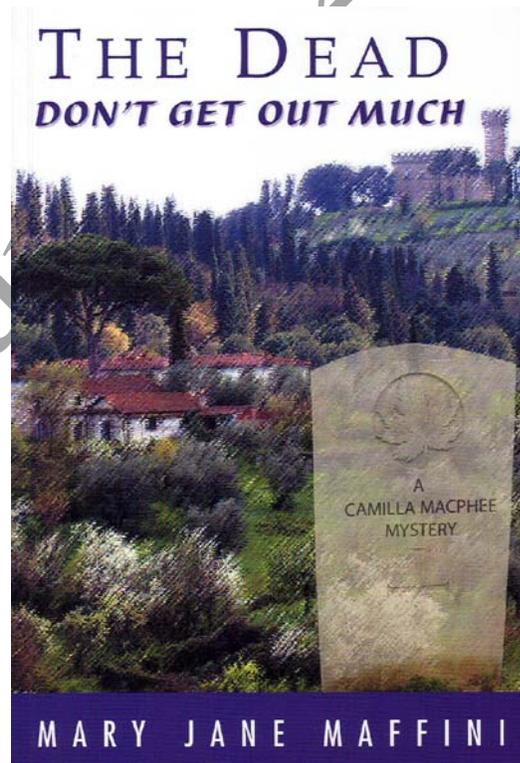
As the genre of crime fiction evolves, many writers are turning to plots with multiple storylines. In separate layers, skillfully combined, such novels often weave together past and present, revealing how historical events can lead inexorably to a dramatic (and often tragic) climax in the contemporary world. This technique increases both the challenge for the reader, and the satisfaction of meeting that challenge and solving the puzzle that lies at the heart of all good mystery fiction.

This week's pick is an outstanding example of what can be done in mysteries-with-history. It is an engrossing, satisfying read that will leave you begging for more.

Mary Jane Maffini

Describing herself as a lapsed librarian, the exuberant and irrepressible Mary Jane Maffini once smuggled a human skeleton into Canada for a mystery bookstore she co-owned! Since then she has largely gone straight, penning nearly twenty short stories and half a dozen novels. A member of the Ottawa-based writer's group, The Ladies' Killing Circle, Maffini has won Arthur Ellis Awards for Best Short Story twice, and has been nominated for four others, including Best First Novel (*Speak Ill of the Dead*, published in 1999), and Best Novel (*Lament for a Lounge Lizard*, 2003). At the annual Bloody Words

convention of crime writers and fans, held recently in Toronto, she was the Canadian Guest of Honour. In addition to *Speak Ill of the Dead*, other novels in the Camilla MacPhee series include *The Icing on the Corpse* (2001), *Little Boy Blues* (2002), and *The Devil's in the Details* (2004).



The Dead Don't Get Out Much (RendezVous Press, 2005)

Remembrance Day, Ottawa. Victim's-rights lawyer Camilla MacPhee and her assistant Alvin are watching the veterans parade past the National Arts Centre, when they notice that one of their

friends, eighty-three year old Violet Parnell, a former member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, is having difficulty. Making their way through the crowd to her side, Violet says she is troubled by a dead man, and promptly faints. Fearing a stroke, her friends rush her to hospital, but before the tests can be completed, Violet disappears.

Returning to her apartment, Camilla and Alvin find that it has been ransacked, and Violet is nowhere to be found. They soon discover that she has flown to Italy, with no indication of why. The only clues are a few photos taken during the Second World War and some letters dating from the same period. Camilla tracks down some friends from the war as she struggles to determine not only why the elderly woman would suddenly rush off to a foreign land, but also why she would take elaborate steps to ensure that her friends could not follow her.

Undeterred, Camilla sets off in pursuit, determined to discover whether Violet is in danger, and to come to her aid if necessary. Before it is over Camilla's journey will take her not only to the scenic hills of Tuscany, but back in time as well. War is a time for violence and betrayal: long-forgotten events will be recalled, secrets will be revealed, and yet more people will die.

Fast-past action and humour

Maffini is truly familiar with the Tuscan landscape and the nuances of Italian life, and it shows in her use of language and in the mannerisms of her characters. Her protagonist, Camilla MacPhee, is a feisty and entirely plausible sleuth, and Camilla's assistant, Alvin, is equally believable, though at times (most times,

actually) you want to poke him with a sharp stick. The plot is full of twists and turns, the action is fast-paced and gripping, and the first-person narrative perfectly captures the immediacy of events. Deftly combining action thriller and light humour set against present-day Ontario, Tuscany, and the events of the Second World War, Maffini manages to distill these disparate elements into one single, satisfying read.

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