

Winter Warmth

Happiness is a good book and...

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

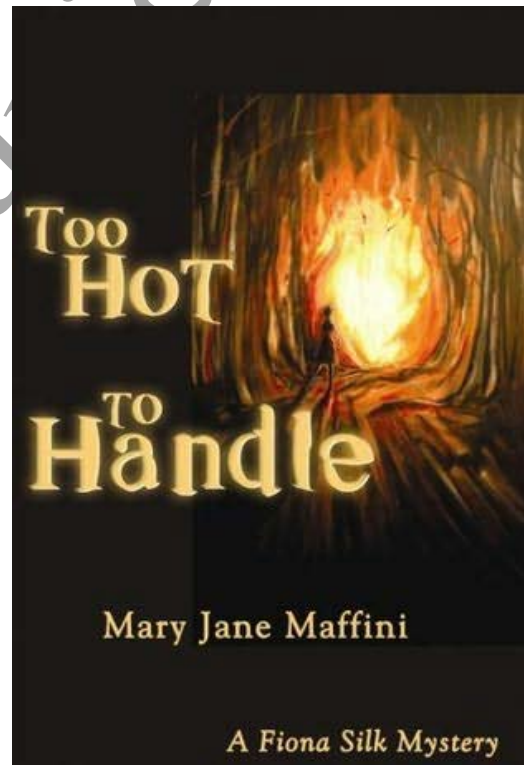
With Christmas well and truly over for another year, and the most recent thaw having come and gone, a thick blanket of postcard-pretty snow has given the Townships a Currier-and-Ives atmosphere, reminding us that Spring is still some weeks away. Skiers and snowboarders are happily carving up the slopes, leaving time for the rest of us to curl up on the sofa with a cup of hot cocoa or glass of wine and a good book, savouring the quiet contentment that dedicated bibliophiles know best. For many readers, this week's pick will be a perfect choice.

Mary Jane Maffini

A prolific Canadian crime writer, Mary Jane Maffini has published nearly two dozen short stories, and has no less than three series of crime novels going simultaneously. Readers may recall her Camilla MacPhee Series (one of which, *The Dead Don't Get Out Much*, was reviewed in these pages in July of 2006), and her Charlotte Adams series (*Organize Your Corpses*, reviewed in August of 2007). As irrepressible as her fictional heroines, Mary Jane is back with yet another protagonist, the erstwhile author Fiona Silk, first introduced in 2003 in the intriguingly-titled *Lament for a Lounge Lizard*. A struggling author, Fiona tries in vain to bring solvency to her career and sanity

to her turbulent personal life. It is a situation with which most people can identify.

A former president of the Crime Writers of Canada and a charter member of the writing group *The Ladies' Killing Circle*, Mary Jane lives in Ottawa with her husband Giulio and two very self-absorbed dachshunds.



Too Hot to Handle (RendezVous Crime, 2007)

The rural tranquility of St. Aubaine, north of Hull, Quebec, is shattered when

the cast and crew of a televised cooking program descend on the small village to do a show. Author Fiona Silk is unfazed. She has more pressing concerns, including looking after Tolstoy, her Siberian Husky, a dwindling (make that nearly nonexistent) bank balance, a lover who's in the hospital recovering from an attack and who doesn't remember her, and a local land developer who wants—really *wants*—the land on which sits a dilapidated cottage left to Fiona by her great-aunt.

Fiona's problems begin as she is returning home to St. Aubaine. As she nears the entrance to a highway, she is passed by a couple in a huge, black Cadillac Escalade, the driver gesturing furiously for her to get her aging Buick Skylark out of the way. She writes off his rudeness until, a few miles further on, she encounters a knot of police cars, fire trucks and traffic pulled over to the side. A skid mark leads past a broken guardrail and down a hill. Beyond lies a black SUV. Fiona is shaken to learn that it was almost certainly the vehicle that had passed her earlier. She is even more shaken when she discovers that there is only one body inside, and no sign of the passenger.

Reaching her home, Fiona is momentarily diverted when an enterprising local teenager, Josey Thring, offers to look after her yard. Josey is undeterred by Fiona's shaky financial situation, saying she can put it on the tab. Fiona decides she can use the help, and acquiesces.

It is not long before Fiona's agent Lola calls with a plan. Knowing that Fiona has money problems, she pitches a book project: Fiona can write an erotic cookbook, aphrodisiac dishes designed to enhance the reader's love life. When Fiona protests that she can't cook, Lola

dismisses her concerns: throw together some recipes, anecdotes, memories—lifestyle books are all the rage, it seems. A generous advance cheque awaits her agreement. The irrepressible Josie offers her services as an Executive Assistant, offering to arrange for donated kitchenware to replace Fiona's own meagre utensils and a food stylist to photograph her dishes. Realising she is in well over her head on this project, Fiona crumbles.

To her chagrin, word of the cookbook project quickly spreads among the good citizens of St. Aubaine. Everyone is eager to contribute recipes, including her hospitalized lover Marc-André, Sgt. F. X. Sarrazin, the burly policeman investigating the SUV crash—even the local taxi driver wants in on the act.

Fiona is just beginning to see her way out of her financial problems when everything seems to take a turn for the worse. First she is banned from visiting Marc-André in the hospital when a nurse overhears him offering Fiona a loan, and claims she was extorting money from the vulnerable man. Then Fiona learns that the driver of the SUV was her ex's former business partner—and that the crash was definitely not an accident, an indication that the police regard her presence at the crash scene as more than a coincidence. Shortly after learning that her home insurance has been dropped due to the cottage's aging wiring, Fiona uses some of her advance money to replace the wiring; but before the work can be completed Fiona's beloved cottage burns to the ground. Things are beginning to look bleak indeed. Somehow Fiona must extricate herself from her financial problems, clear herself from police suspicions, and not least, find a way to reconnect with Marc-André.

Entertaining escapism

Like cat mysteries, Foodie mysteries (as they are called in the trade) are not my favourite genre. Too often neither the recipes nor the plot are very satisfying. That said, *Too Hot to Handle* is an agreeable exception. The antic plot (damsel-in-distress) moves at a frantic pace, reminiscent of the madcap comedy films of the late 1930's and 40's. A true cozy, with little violence and language the kids can read, along with a devilish plot twist near the end, *Too Hot to Handle* doesn't pretend to be anything more than a good read—entertaining escapism—and it succeeds very well, appealing to a broad range of readers. After all, how many cookbook mysteries include a recipe for dog biscuits? In *Too Hot to Handle*, Mary Jane Maffini serves up a treat.

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