

Bleak Harvest

Debut novel combines comedy, crime

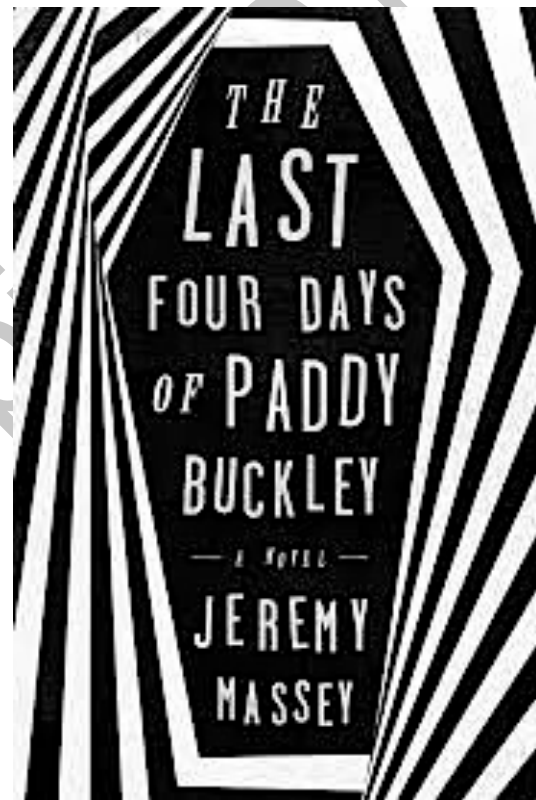
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

The Irish are well known (if not always celebrated) for their dark sense of humour, and on a scale of fifty shades of grey, *The Last Four Days of Paddy Buckley* has to be reckoned among the blackest. Paddy is an undertaker with Gallagher's Funeral Directors, a Dublin firm. Generally he likes his work, making all the necessary arrangements, organising funerals, and helping the bereaved through their ordeal. But this isn't his week. Things have gone from bad to worse, and Paddy is quickly finding himself up a very nasty creek indeed, and lacking the proverbial paddle.

It all begins innocently enough, when Paddy's boss, Frank Gallagher, sends him to the house of a man who has recently died from cancer. His job is to make the funeral arrangements with the man's widow, Lucy Wright. When he arrives she is waiting for him. She is, naturally enough, distraught, and as Paddy leads her through the details of the church services and the burial she begins

to relax, finding comfort in Paddy's hands.



But the mood shifts as Lucy tries to move past the stress of recent weeks, when it was apparent he husband was entering his final days. Gradually and without any intention on either person's part they find themselves drawn to one another physically, and before long they kiss, and move to the

bedroom. Paddy is having all sorts of second thoughts, but they end up making love.

The experience, however, is dampened somewhat when Lucy does not respond to Paddy's caresses, and he looks at her more closely. Lucy has died in the midst of their tryst. Talk about *coitus interruptus*!

One might be forgiven for thinking that Paddy's day couldn't get worse, but you'd be wrong. By early afternoon Paddy is struggling to cope with the morning's events, and in the early hours of the following day he receives a call to collect a body from a local nursing home. It's three a.m. by the time Paddy has finished the job and he's driving home in a pouring rain, drowsily mulling over the day's events, and tuning his car radio when he hits a man in the dark. He jumps from his car and examines the man, but it's clear he's dead. Paddy goes through the man's wallet, trying to determine his identity. His papers reveal him to be one Donal Cullen. Paddy is stunned: he realises the man is—or was—the brother of Vincent Cullen, Dublin's most notorious gangster. Cullen is not known for his sense of compassion; the only thing he'll be interested in is who killed his brother, and extracting a terrible revenge. Paddy drops the

wallet and stumbles back to his car, all the while looking to see whether anyone has seen him. He drives off, trying to make sense of a day in which he'd been directly involved in not one, but two people's deaths. Neither had been intended, but Paddy had played a central role.

The next morning Paddy is in the office, still coming to grips with the events of the previous day, when Frank Gallagher tells Paddy he has a job for him. It seems Vincent Cullen has called: he wants Gallagher's to handle the funeral. Frank asks Paddy to go to the man's home and make the arrangements. Paddy's nightmare is about to turn a whole lot worse: Cullen is bent on revenge, and he owns a very special breed of dog, a combination of wolf, fox, and Alsatian, which is very good at reading people.

Author Jeremy Massey draws on his considerable experience in his own family's funeral business to craft an original and delightfully wry tale of a hapless but likeable person for whom, it seems, nothing can go right. I have only hinted at the bizarre events that complicate Paddy's world, but I can promise you that many more twists and turns await the reader of this exceptional and quirky debut.

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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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