

# Death is how he makes his living

## *Book lover is caught up in murder*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

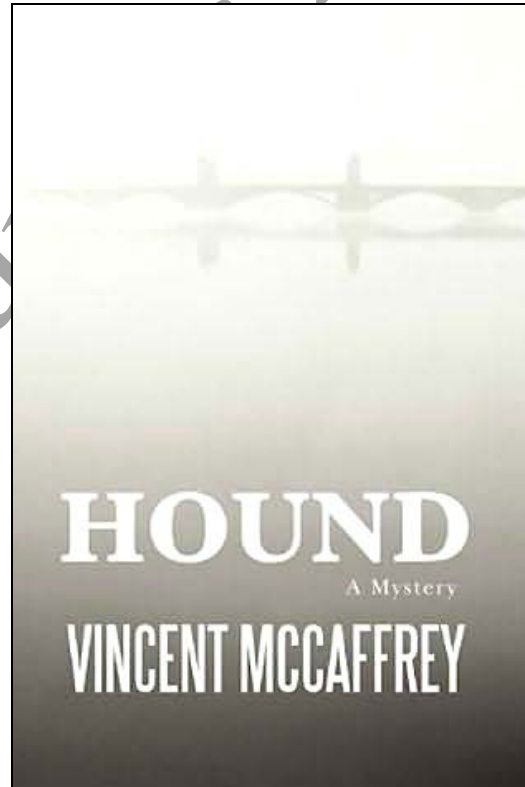
They say write about what you know. Especially good advice for a first novelist, and author Vincent McCaffrey has taken it to heart in his debut novel, *Hound*. The owner of Boston's Avenue Victor Hugo Bookshop, McCaffrey made it a landmark for east coast book lovers for nearly thirty years before moving the bookshop online, where it exists today. Writing books is only his latest incarnation: McCaffrey has also laboured by turns as a snow shoveler, house painter, office boy, dish washer, waiter, and hotel night clerk; self-deprecating by nature, the only occupation he will admit to being good at was shoveling snow. But it's hard to be surrounded by books for so many years without having some of their wisdom rub off, and McCaffrey reveals himself to be a reflective and erudite writer in this, his first published novel.

#### *Hound*

(Small Beer Press, 2009)

Henry Sullivan is a middle-aged dealer in collectible books living in what had been his parent's home in the exclusive area of Boston known as Beacon Hill. In this day of big-box bookstores and Internet sales Henry has carved out a comfortable niche by focusing on selling first editions in fine condition, culled mostly from estate sales. As Henry sees it, death is how he makes his living, the best of his volumes coming from the

collections of people who had recently died, and who never would have given up their treasures in life. Henry shares their love of books, and experiences the true bibliophile's sense of pleasure at having an especially fine specimen pass through his hands.



When a friend clears the contents of a house slated for demolition he makes an unusual discovery, and calls Henry over to have a look. Henry is not prepared for what he finds. The modest cottage had been inhabited by an elderly woman for many years until her recent death, and a small attic room is like a time capsule.

A bare bulb dangling from the ceiling illuminates a desk perfectly arranged with writing paper, a dry inkwell and blotting paper, and a brass letter opener. Remnants of an earlier age. Nearby, a William Morris armchair and reading lamp take up almost half of the available floor space, and first editions dating back to before the First World War, all in pristine condition, fill the walls to overflowing. Adding to Henry's enchantment is a rosewood box containing letters written over a lifetime by the woman to her father and to dozens of friends. Henry is captivated by this glimpse into an earlier era and a lifestyle long since vanished, and resolves to piece together the woman's life.

Before he can satisfy his curiosity, however, Henry receives a second call, this time from a former lover. Morgan Johnson is the widow of Heber Johnson, a literary lion of his day, a successful agent who wanted his sizable collection of books donated to Boston University upon his death. In a panelled room Henry encounters over four thousand volumes, some of them signed, and as many more throughout the house. Morgan asks Henry to appraise the value of the collection for tax purposes; she is keeping only one volume for herself, a gift for her grandchildren. They reminisce about their shared past, and Henry considers how their lives have diverged, and what might have been.

It is all the more shocking, then, when the next day Henry finds a police officer at his door. Morgan Johnson has been strangled, and as he had spent the night with her, the police suspect Henry is her killer. It is a double blow, as the only love in Henry's life has been once more taken from him and he is implicated in her death.

Making a list of anyone who might have a motive to kill Morgan, Henry finds it is maddeningly short. Could the house-cleaner have been interrupted by Morgan in the midst of a theft? Henry very much doubts it. Morgan's son, Arthur, is a former druggie who lives in California; might he have come East and, fueled by desperation, have had a confrontation with his mother over his expensive habit? There is the realtor charged with selling her house, though for the life of him Henry can't see a motive. Henry suspects that an author and former client of Johnson's, Ranulf Richter, might have been having an affair with Morgan. Finally there is Peter Johnson – Heber's son by a former marriage; he had contacted Henry shortly after his stepmother's death, expressing interest in her estate. It is for the reclusive bookseller the beginning of an odyssey grounded in love and ending in death as he struggles to uncover the various secrets of this enigmatic circle of suspects, and in the process Henry's efforts will reawaken his own quest for love and meaning.

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*Hound* has been accurately described as "...a paean to books, bookselling, and the transformative power of the printed word." McCaffrey is clearly a lover of books and this passion informs his tale. It is a literary novel, not so much a book about a mystery as a mystery that is largely about books. By turns insightful, evocative, and occasionally irrelevant, it is a leisurely, sometimes meandering look at the delights of book collecting and the civilizing influence that books can exert on their owners, and a story that will resonate with bibliophiles. That

said, the author would benefit from the hand of a disciplined editor, someone who will keep his tale on track, minimizing the intrusions of the author's views on life when they do not relate, even tangentially, to the storyline. Projected to be the first of a series, *Hound* will appeal to everyone who takes pleasure in the simple joy of reading a well-told tale.

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