

Be careful what you wish for

Fate can play tricks

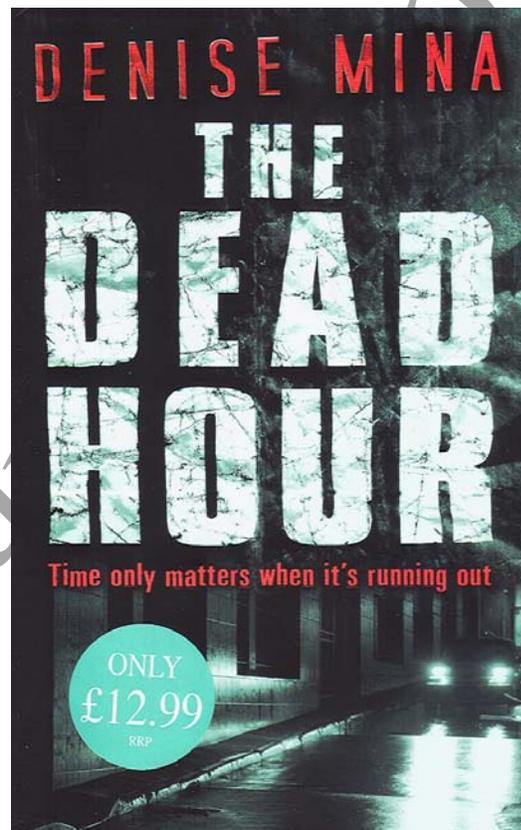
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

In our continuing look at crime fiction of exceptional merit, this week's pick has been nominated by the Mystery Writers of America for an Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel of 2006. Set in Scotland, it offers an engrossing glimpse of a world hopefully far removed from the experience of most readers, yet contains insights about coping with our own lives.

Denise Mina

Born in Glasgow in 1966, Denise Mina followed her family throughout Europe, leaving school at age sixteen and taking a series of jobs, working in a meat factory, as a bar maid, a kitchen porter and cook, and as an auxiliary nurse. Eventually she entered Glasgow University, where she studied law and went on to do doctoral studies and teach criminology at Strathclyde University. During this time she wrote her first crime novel, *Garnethill*, which won the British Crime Writers' Association John Creasey Award for Best First Novel in 1998. The first of a trilogy, this was followed by *Exile* and *Resolution*. In 2005 the first in the Paddy Meehan series, *Field of Blood* was published, which was followed by *The Dead Hour* in 2006. A third novel in this series is slated for publication in 2007.



The Dead Hour (Bantam Press/Transworld, 2006)

Paddy Meehan is a young, overweight, and insecure cub reporter in Glasgow, struggling to keep body and soul together while covering the crime beat in the dead of night. It is a bleak, soul-destroying existence, with long hours spent monitoring police calls on her scanner, drinking bad coffee and eating greasy hamburgers from all-night canteens, and following the cops to a

succession of pub fights, muggings, traffic accidents, and domestic disputes.

Paddy goes through the motions in search of a story that will yield a few precious inches of column space, and that might – just might – get her noticed by her editor and be her ticket out of the crime beat and into more mainstream journalism. In a world of darkness and despair, Paddy Meehan lives in hope.

Late one cold February night, Paddy gets her chance. Responding to a domestic in a leafy suburb in the north of Glasgow, Paddy passes between granite gateposts to arrive at an imposing Victorian house. Two officers are already there, one standing near his squad car, the other talking to a well-dressed man standing in the doorway. Behind him, in the hallway, Paddy can just make out a woman with blood on her face. Paddy approaches them, just in time to hear the man insisting that it won't happen again, and the officer's reply that perhaps the woman should get some medical attention.

Paddy is sure she has a story, but when she identifies herself as a reporter and tries to move beyond the man toward the woman, he prevents her from doing so. Visible only in a hallway mirror, the woman retreats further into the room, insisting that she doesn't want any help. The man presses a fifty-pound note into Paddy's hand, emphasizing that the incident should not get into the papers. Before Paddy can respond he withdraws into the house and closes the door.

The officers are defensive. The woman is Varni Burnet, a lawyer for Amnesty International, one explains; that sort of publicity is damaging to her reputation. Better for all concerned that the matter end there. Paddy is convinced that they too have been bribed. With an unem-

ployed father, and Paddy the sole breadwinner for the family, the money in her hand would solve a lot of problems. Ashamed, she pockets the bank note and leaves.

The next day the woman's body is found. She'd been tortured before she died. The victim lived alone, and there are no leads as to the identity of the man in the doorway. The police call is a matter of record, however, and an inquiry is promised into whether the responding officers acted appropriately. Paddy knows that her own actions will come out and her career will end in disgrace, her family deprived of even her meager income. Her only hope is to identify Varni's killer, unaware that the lawyer's death is only the tip of the iceberg; before it is over Paddy will be drawn into the world of hard drugs and organized crime, and she will be faced with the choice of becoming a killer herself.

***An entertaining read,
with lessons for us all***

The Dead Hour is in the forefront of Tartan Noir, a genre I have written about previously. Not for the faint of heart, it contains explicit sex (though not a lot), graphic violence (quite a bit), and language that some readers may find offensive. That said, it is a novel about nasty people who do nasty things – and in that sense a more restrained treatment of the subject would simply lack credibility. The characters are dark, the themes unavoidably depressing – but the dialogue and the action rings true, and readers in search of a story that portrays the world as at least part of it actually exists will not be disappointed. A well-crafted study of one person's attempt to achieve integrity and self-respect in a world of flawed people and events beyond her control, *The Dead Hour* is an

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entertaining read, with lessons for us all.

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