

Murder in the Big Leagues

Debut novel blends baseball, crime

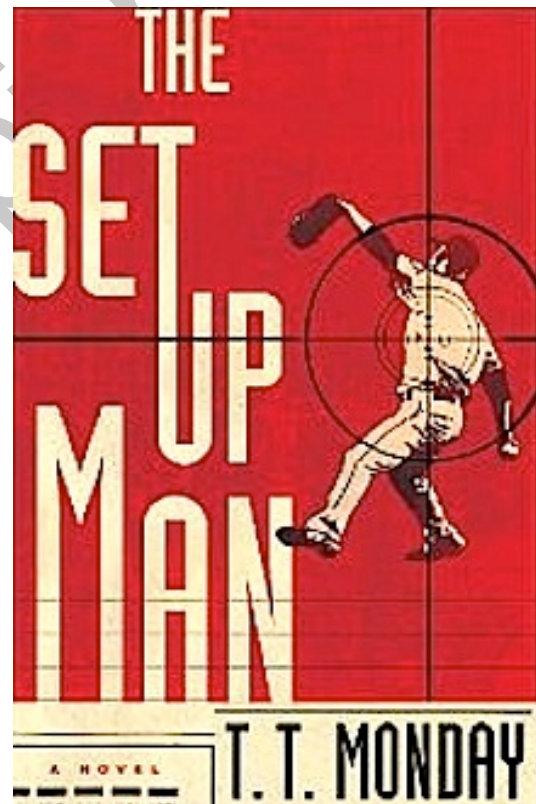
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Johnny Adcock is a pro baseball player for the San Jose Bay Dogs. In an age of specialization he is a left-handed pitcher: his job is to cover the middle innings, especially against left-handed batters, between the starting pitcher and the closer. At the moment he's doing well, earning a million five per year for no more than two hours work a week, but at age 35 the divorced father of an adolescent daughter sees Father Time bearing down on him. He realizes that soon he'll need another career to fall back on, and he's chosen—wisely or not—to moonlight as a PI. Not surprisingly, business is booming; what with road trips and flashy salaries there are lots of opportunities for players (and their wives) to fool around. Word gets around that Johnny is the go-to guy for such problems, and his retirement plans are coming along nicely.

It's business as usual, then, when teammate Frankie Herrera asks Johnny's help in retrieving a sex video his wife made before their marriage. Someone has got hold

of a copy and is threatening to expose her past. It's not only the threat of a scandal, however; Herrera's lucrative advertising endorsements will disappear like last week's corn chips if the video clip becomes public.



That very evening Herrera puts his BMW through a guardrail on the coast highway, killing himself and a seventeen-year-old woman described by the police as “not

related to him.” More to Frankie than meets the eye.

All very unfortunate, and plausibly the end of a familiar and sordid story. That is, until Herrera’s widow shows up at Johnny’s apartment. She’s convinced her husband was murdered, and asks him to look into it.

Johnny agrees, and enlists the aid of an ex-pitcher-turned-sushi-bar-owner named Marcus Washington, who travels to L.A. to follow up on the porn film angle. But the trip turns out to be a dead end, so to speak: the producer died five years earlier, and before Johnny can question the photographer who made the film he turns up dead as well.

The cast of *The Setup Man* is as wide-ranging as a reader could wish for, and includes Frankie’s widow Maria, Javier “Bam Bam” Rodriguez (an ex-catcher turned porn king), and Johnny’s current squeeze, 32-year old Bethany Pham, a venture capitalist. Subplots cater to readers that are not baseball fans, and provide backstories on Johnny’s relationship with his ex, Ginny, and their teenage daughter Izzy. But the author is adept at balancing the aw-shucks subplots with moving the story along, and before Johnny gets to the bottom of things he will have uncovered a lethal mix that

includes blackmail, murder, porn, prostitution, human trafficking, and Mexican cartels that make baseball’s drug scandals look like the stuff of Sunday-school sermons.

It’s not easy writing sports mysteries: on a good day sports fans can be an unforgiving bunch, critical readers who show no mercy for the writer who gets the smallest detail of their favourite pastime ever-so-slightly wrong. And readers of crime fiction are hardly less forgiving, demanding a plot that seamlessly integrates the sports setting into the structure of a story in a way that enhances, rather than distracts, the reader. Despite (or perhaps rising to) these challenges author T. T. Monday (aka Nick Taylor) nails it in *The Setup Man*. The characters are believable, his informed understanding of baseball will resonate with fans, and the plot motors along with just the right balance of action and narration. Along the way readers are treated to the subtleties of one of the most sublime of sports, juxtaposed against the dark backdrop of organized crime. A classic example of compelling entertainment wrapped around a serious social theme, *The Setup Man* is a captivating mix of a readable sports yarn and a classic California -based murder mystery with a twist you won’t see coming.

T. T. Monday, *The Setup Man*

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and the *Montreal Review of Books*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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