

# Old Sins

## *Novel probes the ambiguity of war*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

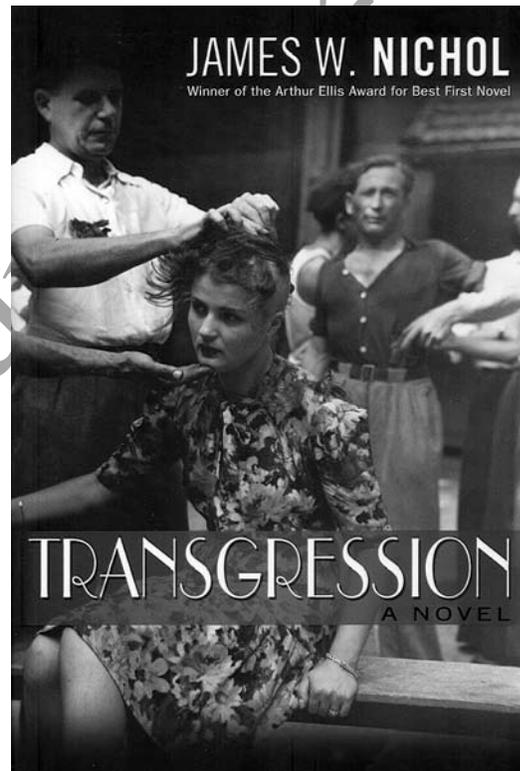
A novelist is first and foremost a storyteller, transporting readers into other worlds. A skilled novelist may add another layer, transcending the particularities of time and place to confront issues common to the human condition. In so doing, the author not only helps us to understand others, but to better understand ourselves as well.

This week's pick contains not one, but two storylines. The first chronicles the odyssey of a star-crossed young couple, she French, he German, thrown together by the circumstances of war. The second traces the discovery of a body, unearthed three thousand miles away, shortly after the war, in the quiet farmlands of Ontario. As these tales converge they make for an intriguing look at ordinary people trying to bring meaning to their lives amidst the unthinkable horrors of war. It raises disturbing questions about how you and I would cope in similar circumstances.

### *James W. Nichol*

Born in Ontario in 1940, James Nichol is a distinguished playwright whose works have been produced in most of the major theatres across Canada. His first novel, *Midnight Cab*, grew out of a series of thirty-five half-hour radio dramas produced by the CBC in the 1990s. The novel was shortlisted for the Gold Dagger Award in the U.K., and won the

Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel in 2003. Published in ten countries, it went on to sell over half a million copies worldwide. An accomplished screenwriter as well, his dramas have been widely performed on television.



James and his wife Judi grew up in Paris, Ontario. They have three sons and four grandchildren, and presently make their home in Stratford.

***Transgression***  
(McArthur & Co., 2008)

France, 1941: in German-occupied Rouen, a young French girl, Adele Georges, seeks information from the Wehrmacht about the fate of her father. It is a dangerous quest: a local political organizer, he would have been seen as a Bolshevik by the Nazis. She comes away from the office with nothing, but Manfred Halder, a young German soldier observing the scene, is drawn to her plight. He offers to help her discover the fate of her father, and the two become close. Over the following weeks they become lovers, and eventually their relationship becomes public. In the highly-charged world of occupied France such affairs are fraught with danger, and aware of the suspicions of others, they plot to run away together. Before they can do so, however, Manfred disappears; Adele fears that he has been transferred to the Russian front.

Shift to Canada, shortly after the war: in Ontario a young child finds a human finger in a grassy field. Jack Cullen, the local chief of police, carries his own burden from the war: his only son, a Canadian soldier, has been killed at Dieppe. Cullen is also fighting for his job; the mayor wants to replace him with his own nephew. Deciding to keep the discovery to himself, Cullen searches for the owner of the missing finger. Before long he finds a body in a local stream; the person has been shot, execution-style, in the back of the head.

As the war in Europe draws to a close there is an inevitable settling of accounts. Partisans begin rounding up suspected collaborators and sympathizers, and Adele's protests go unheeded. Her head is shaved, she is

beaten, and she is forced to go into hiding. A black marketer finds her a room and a job in Paris, but before long Adele heads for Germany in search of Manfred. When she arrives at Buchenwald she is badly shaken by the German atrocities there, and tries to help the survivors recover some vestige of their former lives. Over time she concludes that Manfred is dead, and when a Canadian soldier, Alex Wells, befriends Adele, she reaches out for affection like a starving man would grasp for a few scraps of bread; before long they make love, and when he asks her to marry him, Adele begins to believe that perhaps some small measure of her life can be rebuilt.

Following their marriage in France, Alex is shipped back to Canada. By the time they are reunited in Quebec City Adele realizes that Alex is suffering recurrent nightmares about the war. When they settle in Ontario Adele resolves to cope with Alex's fears and somehow carve out a future for them both.

Then Manfred reappears.

***An engrossing suspense tale***

Written in a spare, unsentimental style that nevertheless manages to be richly evocative, *Transgression* is an insightful account of flawed and fallible persons caught up in events larger than they can comprehend. As Adele Georges moves through the war, inevitably making the wrong decisions and compounding them in ways that can only lead to disaster, we are tempted to take her by the shoulders and try to shake some sense into her. But given her youth and the insane world in which she finds herself, one must ask, would you or I do better?

An engrossing suspense tale in its own right, Nichol's novel is also a nuanced,

The Sherbrooke *Record*, Friday, September 12, 2008

probing study of the moral ambiguity of war, laying bare the fact that in such conflicts there are few heroes, but many victims. It is a fine read.

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