

Canadians shine

Canuck crime writers lead the way

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

It's that time of year again, meaning the annual crime writing awards are being given out for the best of the best, and it's been a stellar year for Canadians. First Torontonian Marc Strange turned American heads receiving an Edgar Award for Best Paperback Original from the Mystery Writers of America for his novel *Body Blows*. Then fellow Toronto author Howard Shrier, last year's winner of the Arthur Ellis Award for Best first Novel, returned to pick up this year's Best Novel Award for *High Chicago*. Earlier in the year Alan Bradley, formerly of Kelowna, B.C. (he now makes his home in Malta), blew readers off the map with his debut novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, which picked up a Debut Dagger Award from Britain's Crime Writers' Association; and at last month's Arthur Ellis Awards he matched the deed, picking up an Ellis for Best First Novel. Did I mention that Townshipper Louise Penny has garnered an unprecedented third-in-a-row Agatha Award for *A Brutal Telling*, given out by the folks at Malice Domestic, for Best Novel of the Year? It's like the Olympics all over again.

Hard, then, to pick a Canadian crime novel to focus on, especially when most of the winners have already been reviewed in these pages. But hey, who said life is easy? So herewith, a brief selection of tales that span the country from the Maritimes to Vancouver. All

fine works among the year's best, that I haven't reviewed until now, for your reading enjoyment.

WEIGHT OF STONES



C.B. FORREST
a mystery

C. B. Forrest, **The Weight of Stones** **(Rendezvous Crime, 2009)**

Toronto, 1999. As the city inches toward the new millennium Metro Police Detective Charlie McKelvey is seeing a therapist and wrestling with grief and guilt: in a burst of tough love he ejected his son Gavin from their house, and before long the boy was murdered. To make matters worse, McKelvey is con-

vinced he knows who killed his son: a Quebec biker and ex-con sent to Toronto to form a chapter for a biker gang from South America. He has no evidence, though, and without it his superiors are not prepared to take the case forward.

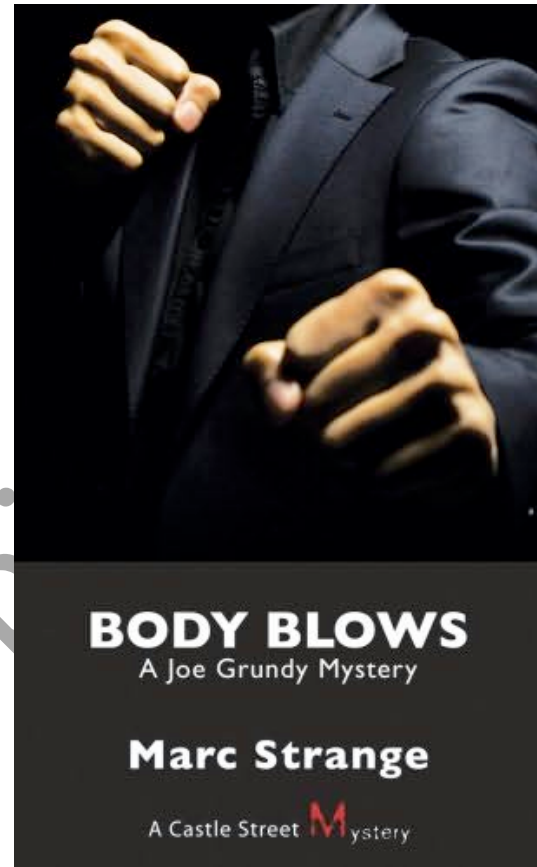
There is no light at the end of the tunnel for McKelvey, and when his wife leaves him and then an unexpected illness forces him to retire, the troubled ex-cop must make life-defining choices utterly alone.

Exploring McKelvey's grief and desire for revenge, *The Weight of Stones* is a brooding tale that forces readers to examine their own values. The result is an introspective, reflective and literate work that will resonate with thoughtful readers. Shortlisted for this year's Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel, the sequel, *Slow Recoil*, is due out later this year.

**Marc Strange, *Body Blows*
(Dundurn 2009)**

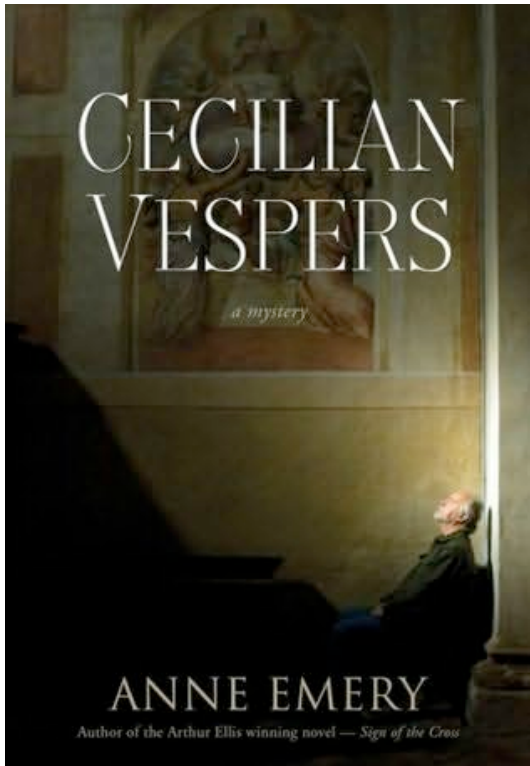
Ex-boxer Joe Grundy is personal bodyguard and head of security for seventy-four-year old-millionaire Leo Alexander, who has just extensively renovated Vancouver's Lord Douglas Hotel. Grundy is unswervingly loyal to his boss, even to the extent of nearly dying by taking multiple bullets meant for the man in an attempted hit. Leo lives in a luxurious penthouse suite on the top floor of the hotel, and one evening Leo and Grundy return from a party to find that someone has murdered Raquel Mendez, Leo's live-in housekeeper and lover. When Grundy notices a blood smear on the top-floor security keypad and hears someone in the stairwell, he gives chase. Emerging from the hotel he is nearly run over by someone on a dirt bike coming out of the construction site

next door. He's gotten away, but the site isn't devoid of interest: someone has fallen – or been pushed – from the penthouse terrace, twenty floors above, impaled on some construction rebar. He won't be doing any talking.



Leo wants his revenge for his lover's death, and he's not about to wait for the cops to solve the case. It falls to Grundy to find the killer. He begins by digging into Leo's flamboyant past, one that includes a parade of ex-lovers, questionable business deals, and estranged children. But when the police arrest Leo, Grundy knows he really has his work cut out for him.

Fast-paced and hard-hitting, *Body Blows* is classic hard-boiled, with colourful characters, snappy dialogue and a cynical point of view. If you like Hemingway, you'll like Marc Strange.



**Anne Emery, *Cecilian Vespers*
ECW Press, 2009**

Former Arthur Ellis Award winner Anne Emery has penned another Halifax-based mystery featuring criminal lawyer Montague Collins. In *Cecilian Vespers* Collins comes to the aid of an old friend. Catholic Father Brennan Burke is trying to realize his long-held dream of an academy of church music, with the ultimate aim of reintroducing the great musical works of the Church's past to a new generation of churchgoers. Father Burke is delighted when he manages to attract a collection of students from all over the world. Like many Catholics, he's not a fan of the innovative ecclesiastical music that dominated the Church following Vatican II; he wants to reintroduce traditional forms of celebration. But some of the students aren't happy with what they see as his old-fashioned and elitist ideas. The schism threatens to boil over into open rebellion.

When a renowned theologian in the group is killed in a Halifax church, the police look to the group to find the murderer. But is it conceivable that someone would kill over a theological dispute? The priest and the lawyer labour to reach their own conclusions, and their efforts will take them abroad, to the heart of the Church in Rome itself.

Well-researched and original, *Cecilian Vespers* will appeal to fans of ecclesiastical mysteries who can get past (or are intrigued by) the details of church history and theology. Fear not; as befits a church mystery there are wheels within wheels, and plot twists aplenty.

NOTE: In response to numerous requests, recently I put up a crime fiction website featuring my reviews and interviews, tributes, a list of independent mystery bookstores, and other resources for both readers and writers. You can find it at deadlydiversions.com Use the *Contact Me* button to let me know what you think!

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