

Cooperman Redux

A tale of two Howards

Suspended Sentences

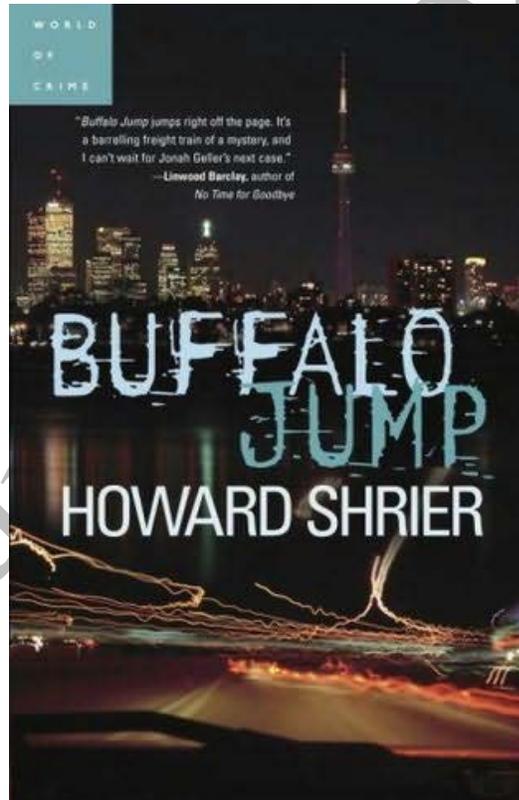
by Jim Napier

POP QUIZ for all Canadian mystery fans: name the creator (hint: first name Howard) of a fictional Jewish private investigator based in southern Ontario. If you said Howard Engel, it would be understandable. One of Canada's best-loved crime writers (and member of the Order of Canada), Engel has regaled readers for decades with the exploits of his loveable schmuck Benny Cooperman, a PI located in the fictional town of Grantham, Ontario. However, there's a new Howard on the horizon, and his protagonist bears only a passing resemblance to Engel's creation. No schmuck, he is a lot tougher, slightly grittier, and strictly a big-city sleuth; he is, in fact, a Cooperman for the new millennium.

Howard Shrier

Born and raised in Montreal, Howard Shrier graduated with honours in journalism and creative writing from Concordia University. He has worked as a crime reporter and as a writer for the radio news, as well as in theatre and television, and as a senior communications advisor to various government agencies.

Howard lives with his wife and sons in Toronto where, admitting to a certain fondness for single malts, he writes above a bar and café in Toronto's Annex neighborhood.



Buffalo Jump
(Vintage Canada/Random House,
2008)

Ex-Israeli soldier and Toronto private investigator Jonah Geller is not having an especially good year. He's recovering from having been shot when a tobacco-smuggling case he was working went wrong, getting a good cop paralyzed in the process. His girlfriend walked out on him while he was still in the hospital, and his boss has put him on

probation until he can demonstrate that he's up to the job.

Just when Jonah thought things couldn't get worse, Dante Ryan, a hit man for the mobster he failed to put away, approaches Geller with an offer he can't refuse: he wants Jonah to take him on as a client.

Geller is not one to take a challenge lightly. He could, of course, simply refuse the case. Or could he? It turns out that the killer has been given a contract he doesn't want to fulfill: it involves killing a man and his wife and child. It goes against the hit man's own code of ethics—you read right—and he wants to know who ordered the hit, and why. If Geller takes the case, he might just be able to prevent the killings from taking place, and beneath all the tough-guy persona Jonah Geller is a deeply moral man.

At the same time, an office colleague, François Paradis, asks for Geller's help. The mother of a client has died recently in Meadowvale, a local nursing home, and the client wonders whether someone there was at fault. Sidelined from bigger cases, his career pretty much on hold, Geller agrees to help.

At first things seem simple enough. He runs a background check on the Meadowvale and it comes up clean. But when he and a colleague visit the facility under the guise of looking to place their mother there, and are unmasked, they encounter a burly man with a gun and are forced to flee for their lives.

Meanwhile, Geller's investigation into the hit man's target seems to have stalled. The man is a respected member of the community, with an upmarket home and the sole owner of a thriving

pharmacy. Why would anyone want his entire family killed?

In nearby Buffalo the drug business operates on a whole different level. Barry Aiken, one of life's failures living on the edge of despair, is dependent on a black-market dealer for affordable meds. When he arrives at the dealer's house and finds him dead, Barry's first thought is to panic. Unfortunately, he goes with his second thought, which is to scoop up all the drugs he can, take them home, and sell them to his friends. His dealer's death will be Barry's own ticket out of poverty. A great idea, if only the killer wasn't just outside, watching Barry's every move.

A conscientious man, Jonah Geller works the nursing-home case while he tries to discover who would want an innocuous pharmacist dead. Of course, he has to keep the latter case to himself; not only is he in disgrace with his boss for mishandling the tobacco-smuggling case, but having a hit man for a client isn't exactly the sort of thing you can tell your boss—or the police—about. Geller is forced, then, to walk a tortuous path between the law, loyalty to his boss, and his own code of ethics as he tries to solve these puzzles. That path will lead to attacks on innocent bystanders, Geller himself, and more than one death before things are finally sorted.

Tough-guy action, snappy dialogue

Buffalo Jump has a definite hard-boiled flavour, combining tough-guy action, snappy dialogue, and a flawed protagonist, set against a gritty background. The justice is cosmic, rather than legal, with Geller taking matters into his own hands, and although the tone of the story is permeated by a jaded outlook, it is still

grounded in a strong sense of right and wrong. Nicely-paced, the action is interspersed with a strong backstory fleshing out Jonah Geller's conflicted past and making him both a believable and a sympathetic character. *Buffalo Jump* is a fine debut novel, and readers will want to keep an eye out for its sequel, *High Chicago*, which is slated for publication in 2009.

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