

Six for the summer

Light reading for backyard breaks

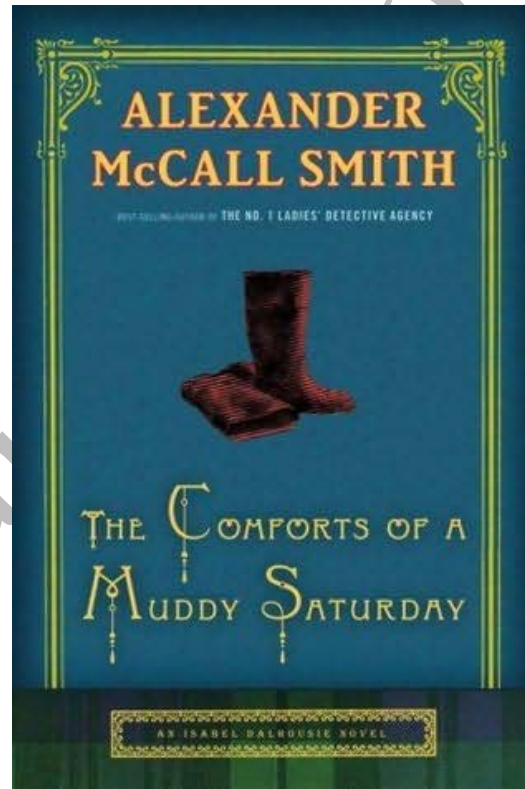
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

According to the calendar it's officially summer, even if the weather isn't exactly playing along. Most people will soon be headed for the beach or cottage, while others will settle for just taking it easy while the kids are diverted by day camp or spending time with their friends. So take your pleasure where you can: grab yourself a cold one, find a comfortable chair to catch those brief moments when the sun deigns to peek through the clouds, and settle back with a good summer read. Like a beer, it should be light, to your taste, and easy to digest. Here are six tales with a minimum of violence, my summer suggestions for mindless mayhem.

Alexander McCall Smith,
The Comforts of a Muddy Saturday
(Knopf, 2008)

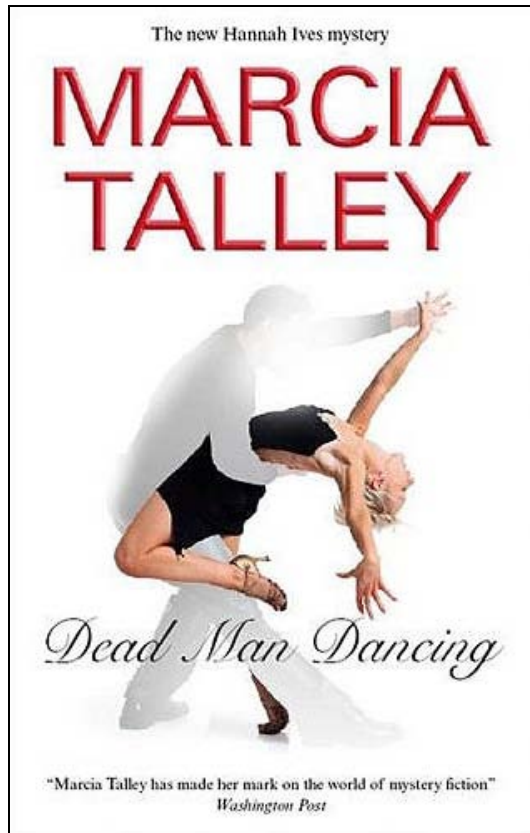
The fifth novel in Alex McCall Smith's Sunday Philosophy Club series, this one finds Edinburgh-based philosopher-turned-amateur-sleuth Isabel Dalhousie coming to the rescue of a doctor in disgrace: it seems he has been accused of fraud when a patient tragically dies after being treated with a newly-marketed drug. Is it a simple mistake, an accident,



or is corporate greed involved? As usual there are subplots in the offing, as Isabel wrestles with her housekeeper over the parenting of Isabel's infant son, Charlie, and she tries to untangle her feelings for Jamie, a younger man in her life who has a growing relationship with someone else.

A prodigious writer, Alex McCall Smith has penned no less than six series of crime novels, each of them featuring idiosyncratic characters in unique, even exotic, settings. If by some quirk of fate

you haven't run into his books before, you are in for a rare treat.

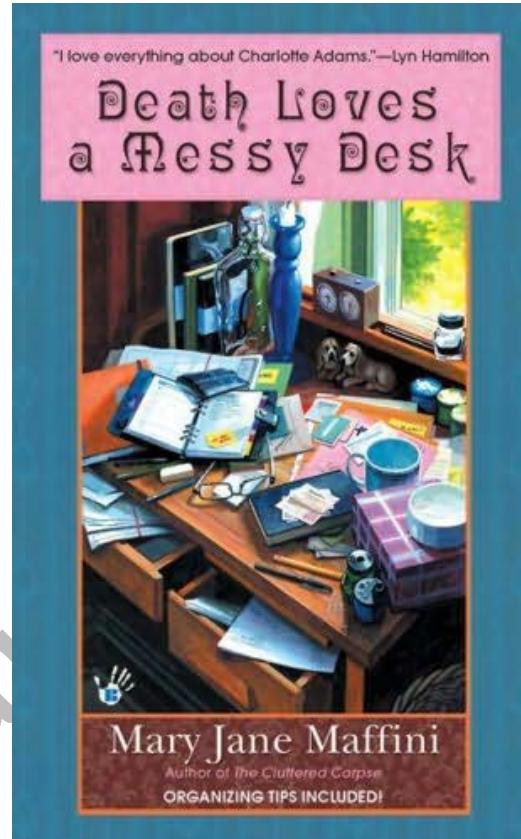


**Marcia Talley,
Dead Man Dancing
(Severn House, 2008)**

It had to happen: all those "reality" TV shows have finally spawned a novel. In this tale by Baltimore-based crime writer Marcia Talley, Hannah Ives finds herself drawn into conflict when she innocently suggests that her sister Ruth and her fiancée Hutch take ballroom dancing lessons to prepare for their upcoming wedding.

Putting their misgivings aside they press on in their quest to polish their dancing skills, but when Kay and Hutch are cajoled into entering a televised dance competition things heat up: Ruth sees red, only this time it's blood. When one of the dance partners winds up in the ICU fighting for life, Hannah must

drawn on her sleuthing skills to untangle the mess, and hopefully save Ruth's and Hutch's relationship in the process. An intriguing and original tale, and an entertaining read.



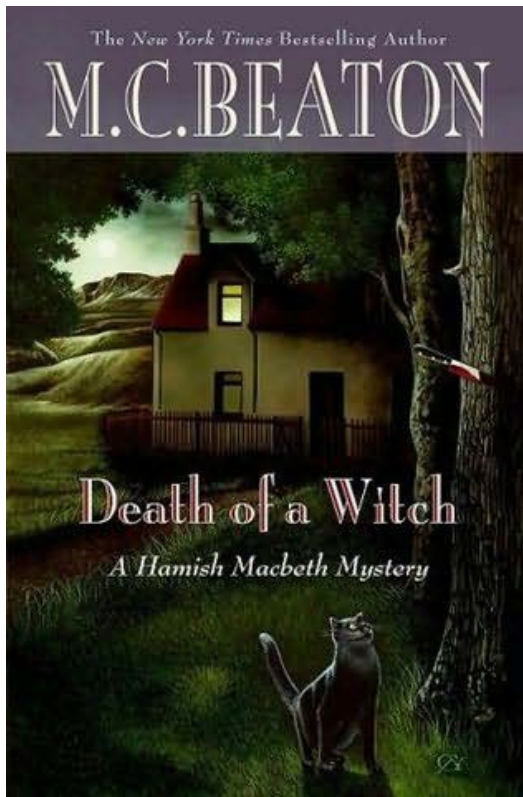
**Mary Jane Maffini,
*Death Loves
a Messy Desk*
(Berkley Prime Crime, 2009)**

She's baack: Charlotte Adams, the lovable professional organizer with a penchant for getting into a mess with the law. When she's hired by an office manager to organize a co-worker's desk, it seems straight forward enough—at least until the worker goes missing.

Charlotte must wade through a gaggle of corporate misfits that includes a bitchy co-worker and the bosses' son, who has a crush on the missing woman.

When she gains entry into the woman's house, and finds it neat as the proverbial pin, she realizes that something just doesn't add up. Throw in a body in the woods that bears every sign of a professional hit, and Charlotte is clearly in over her head.

Peppered with organizing tips with a macabre twist ("Position your desk so your back is never to the door. This aids concentration, and it just might save your life") *Death Loves a Messy Desk* is an engaging, funny take on the corporate world: if you work in an office, chances are you'll find more than one nutty co-worker here.



M.C. Beaton,
Death of a Witch
(Grand Central, 2009)

Returning from a holiday abroad, constable Hamish Macbeth finds that in

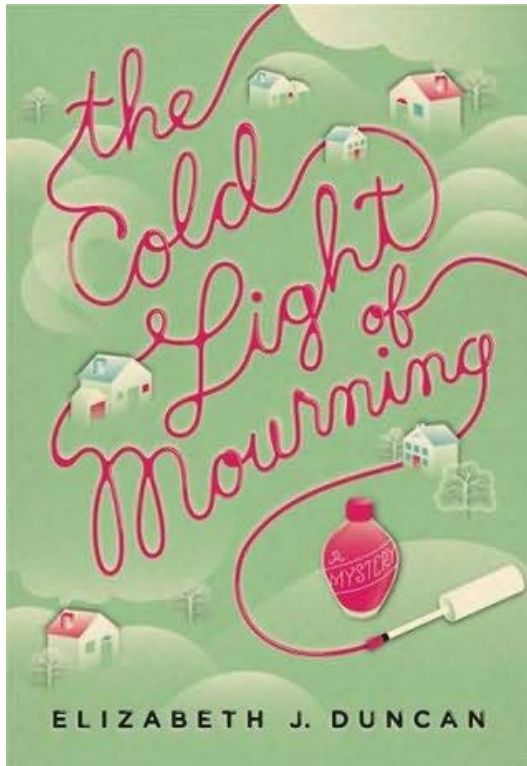
his absence a "foreign" woman, Catriona Beldame, has moved into the tiny Scottish village of Lochdubh (pronounced *Lock-doo*) and has begun selling exotic potions to the menfolk.

Not surprisingly, the local women are outraged at their husbands' coming and goings, and think she's a witch. Hamish dismisses their concerns—until Catriona turns up dead. When Hamish, an eligible bachelor, calls in an attractive forensics expert to help with the case he gets more than he bargained for. Several more people will die as Hamish battles village prejudice, a woman with designs on him, and even the infamous Scottish weather before the case is resolved.

This is the 24th outing of the erstwhile constable, and the books are every bit as good as the television series, which is very good indeed.

Elizabeth J. Duncan,
The Cold Light of Mourning
(Minotaur Books, 2009)

The tranquil setting of rural North Wales is disturbed when a young woman goes missing on the very day of her wedding. But concern turns to scandal when a body turns up under the coffin of a recently-interred elderly woman. The local constabulary are clearly in over their heads, and it falls to a friend of the victim and a retired postmistress to untangle a skein of clues and bring a murderer to book.

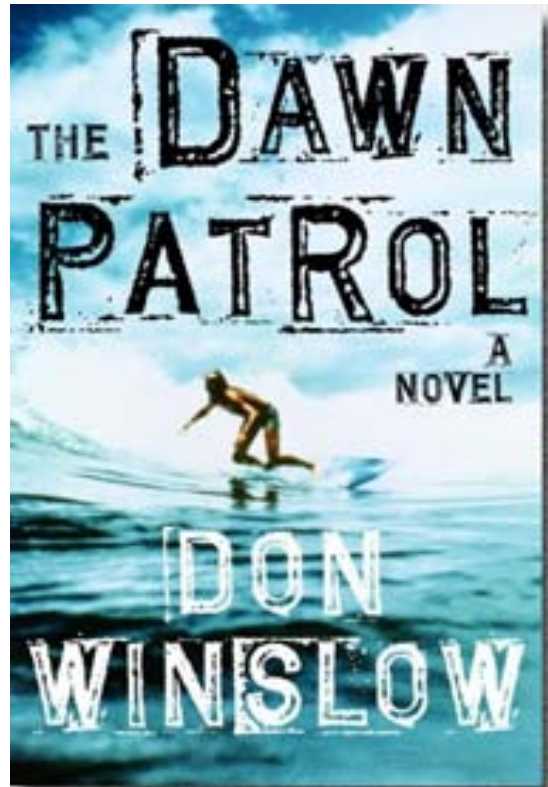


The winner of the Malice Domestic Best First Traditional Mystery Novel competition, Toronto-based author Elizabeth J. Duncan has served up a winner full of clever clues and twists and turns in the tradition of Agatha Christie. Let's hope it is the first of many to come.

**Don Winslow,
The Dawn Patrol
(Vintage Crime, 2008)**

Experienced thriller writer Don Winslow has managed to combine fast-paced action with dark comedy in a saga about half a dozen of mostly twenty-something surfers on the California coast.

Up every morning to catch the best waves, they are the Dawn Patrol. For them surfing is not merely a leisure activity, it's a lifestyle. One of them, Boone Daniels, is a private investigator.



When a lawyer comes to him about a missing person—a witness in a case of arson fraud—Boone agrees to help find her. A buttoned-down, upwardly-ambitious lawyer and a surfer who's so laid back that his friends claim he's almost horizontal is not a marriage made in heaven, and much of the plot turns on this odd-couple interplay.

Rekindling memories of *The Rockford Files* and *Magnum, P.I.*, *The Dawn Patrol* nicely captures the sun-baked mentality of the subculture of surfer dudes, and wraps it around a well-paced plot peppered with staccato dialogue. It's a perfect escape for Readers of a Certain Age, or just those seeking a radical change of scene.

Jim Napier can be reached at jim.napier52@gmail.com