

Politics is murder

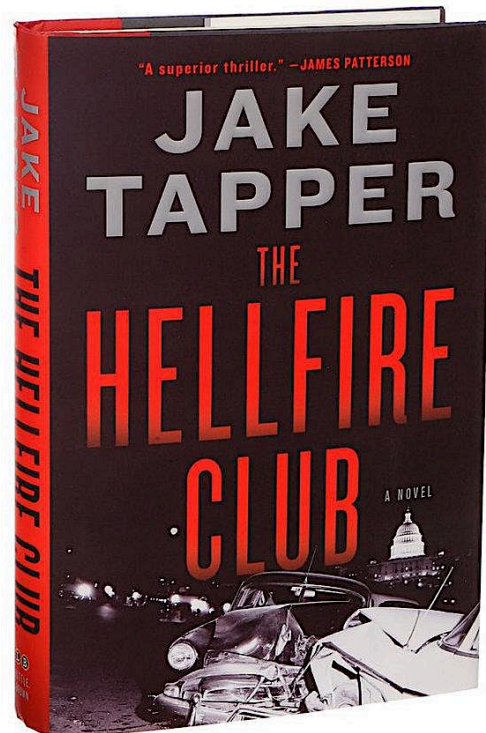
(And in Washington they take things literally)

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

I'm generally wary of novels written by celebrity authors. All too often they're either ghosted or simply poorly written (and occasionally both), feeble efforts to cash in on the author's name recognition, even in an unrelated field. So over the past few years I've passed on literary efforts by singer/songwriter Willy Nelson, Chuyck Barris, the late game-show host (and self-proclaimed CIA operative), and the largely ignored ex-Washington power broker Newt Gingrich in favour of focusing on writers who I know have something to say, and are well-versed in saying it.

That said, I recently decided to have a look at *The Hellfire Club*, a Washington-based crime thriller penned by CNN news anchorman Jake Tapper. His business is words, after all, and he's both a student of history and knowledgeable about the convoluted political intrigues taking place inside the Beltway. He's also written three well-regarded books which, though not novels, nonetheless gave him scope to spread his literary wings.



Overall, I wasn't disappointed. *The Hellfire Club* is a political thriller set mostly in Washington DC in the mid-1950s. It builds on the polarizing events of the turbulent McCarthy era, when the junior senator from Wisconsin was waging the politics of division among the American people. Sound familiar? You'd not be far wrong if you suspected a sub-text to Tapper's tale, but it's more than that. *The Hellfire Club* is simply a

mostly-well-written story in its own right, the chronicle of Charlie Marder, a Columbia University professor who had fought in the Second World War and authored a widely-regarded book on American history, and who finds himself (in part due to his wealthy and influential father) a newly-minted congressman in the nation's capitol.

And the book begins with a bang. Marder struggles out of a creek in the early hours, wading toward shore, trying to make sense of how he got there. Before long he realizes that he wasn't alone. In the nearly-submerged car he finds the lifeless body of a woman he doesn't recognize. He knows he's been drinking, though he doesn't recognize the car. The young woman's perhaps? Before he can sort things out an acquaintance comes by and spots him in the water. Recognizing the potentially devastating consequences of the situation he helps Charlie to deal with it.

So begins Charlie Marder's descent into the labyrinthine world of Washington politics. It is a tortured journey, one that will threaten his marriage and the lives of both he and his wife, and, as nothing in Washington ever happens in isolation, will involve the movers and shakers of national politics, revealing not a few issues simmer-

ing just below the surface of those turbulent times.

The Hellfire Club is not a perfect book. It has its share of writing problems, especially as Tapper attempts to bite off a very large bit of American political history. The reader will encounter avoidable name-dropping (in addition to the sort that isn't avoidable in a book like this), information-dumps (in an effort to clarify events for an audience who may not have lived through them), and is too often simply overwritten.

That said, these errors are minor and forgivable, for holding the entire edifice up is a plot that is both well-conceived and well-structured. Tapper is first and foremost a journalist, and his tale is meticulously researched, with over ten pages of annotated sources. Readers in search of a message for our own times will find no shortage of parallels with contemporary players in the political realm. But *The Hellfire Club* is no thinly-disguised polemic against current demagogues; the tension is engrossing when it needs to be, and there are multiple plot twists as the story moves toward its dramatic conclusion. This is a book that will appeal to older readers with long memories, but no less to younger readers simply in search of a well-told tale.

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§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, was published in the Spring of 2017 and the next in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled to launch in 2019. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com