

An Instant Classic

Spotlight shines on McCarthy Era

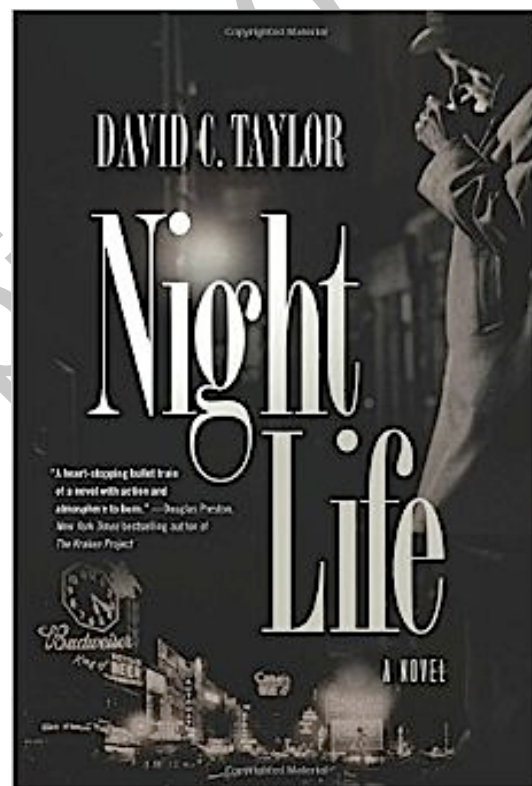
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

I t's 1954, and aided by the headline-making Congressional Hearings of Senator Joe McCarthy, Cold War paranoia is stirring up America's passions. Michael Cassidy is a police detective in Manhattan, cut in a mold that is going out of fashion. He's a cop's cop, in the classic sense of the term: he has his own moral code, which includes never working a case half-heartedly, and never, ever abusing his police powers. When he discovers a fellow detective beating a hooker he throws him out of a hotel window, a move that will, predictably, have repercussions.

Unfortunately Cassidy's single-mindedness leads him to cross paths with Roy Cohn, the lead investigator for Senator McCarthy. The encounter is a minor one: when a petty stick-up artist that beat an old man tries to avoid arrest Cassidy collars him and administers a little street justice up against Cohn's Cadillac limousine. What could have played out as a minor incident escalates into a pissing contest, and McCarthy's

henchman has a long memory. It will mark a turning point in Cassidy's personal life.



Cassidy and his partner Tony Orso are working the case of a body found in an apartment in Hell's Kitchen. The man, one Alexander Ingram, had been tied to a chair and his shirt ripped off, a gag preventing him from screaming. A pair of pliers nearby tells a grisly story: he'd been tortured to death.

When the case turns out to be one of a series of murders of young men, Cassidy follows the evidence. The trail leads him to the backstage world of Broadway. The case takes on added significance when a pair of FBI agents turn up, claiming that Alex Ingram was a person of interest in a matter of national security, and asking—make that demanding—to be kept fully informed of Cassidy's investigation.

Set against the colourful and contrasting worlds of Hell's Kitchen, Sardi's nightclub, Greenwich Village and the Waldorf-Astoria, and peopled by long-vanished figures like Art Tatum and Billie Holiday, Roy Cohn and David Schine, *Night Life* sketches a portrait of a turbulent time in America, marked by dark days and even darker nights. The supporting characters include the obligatory femme fatale, in this case a captivating woman named Dylan McCue, who moves into Cassidy's apartment building, Carlos Ribera (no relation to the Spanish artist of more than half a century earlier), a

Cuban modernist with a fiery temperament, and a thoroughly reptilian Roy Cohn, whose portrait seems eerily accurate to the real man.

The writing is classic noir, stylish and atmospheric, always insightful and by turns taut and evocative and frequently poetic:

"A quick flash of her, turning to see him as he walked into the Oak Bar at the Plaza to meet her for drinks, blond hair cut short, a bright smile, happy to see him, eager. His heart would lift. A kiss, quickly broken by her, her Midwestern upbringing making her leery of public displays of affection. Early in the affair when it was full of light."

Night Life opens with strength and builds nicely, racing toward a blistering finish. The whole screams out for film treatment. Nominated for an Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel of 2016, it is up against some heady competition; but for my money, it's the clear winner.

Previously published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, April 2016.

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*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com