

Sugar and Spite

When the course of true love takes a bend in the road

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

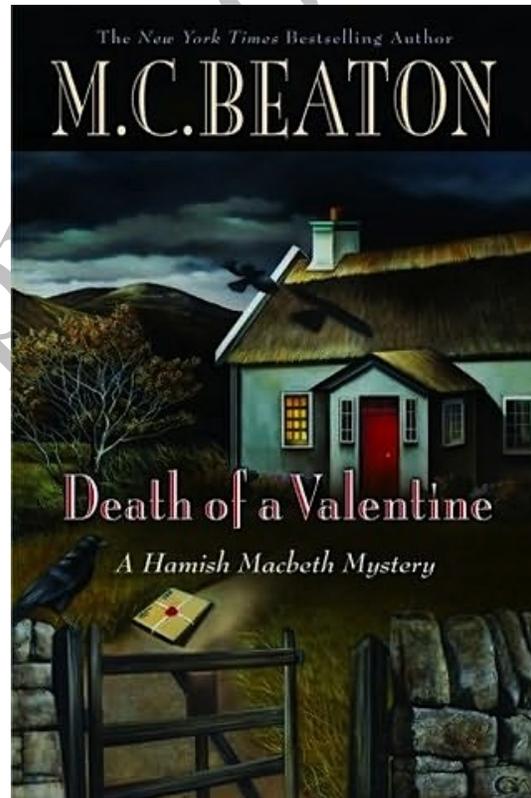
*Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Romania.*

—Dorothy Parker (1893–1967)

The American humourist Dorothy Parker was building on the theme that the course of true love ne'er runs smoothly, and to celebrate Valentine's Day this week's selections of crime novels explore that theme. In an entertaining mix of lighthearted tales about marriage mayhem, and mystery three talented authors demonstrate that life is not always a bowl of cherries; sometimes it's just the pits.

M. C. Beaton,
Death of a Valentine
(Constable & Robinson, 2010)

Avid TV viewers may fondly recall the BBC series *Hamish Macbeth*, which aired in North America over the past several years and featured British actor Robert Carlisle. As the amiable and at times beleaguered Police Constable (now Sergeant) uneasily presiding over the rural Scottish village of Lochdubh, Hamish often has his hands full dealing with the minor misdeeds of his eccentric neighbours, whether they are simply lost in the mountains, engaging in a bit of poaching, or involved in simple misunderstandings that threaten to escalate into village-wide feuds.



In *Death of a Valentine* Hamish's problems take a decidedly personal turn, and he finds himself betrothed to Constable Josie McSween, an officer newly assigned to the village. Although she is smitten at first sight, Hamish is less than impressed with his new officer: she seems constantly to wrong-foot

herself in her work. Very much the traditionalist, Hamish is concerned about observing proper decorum, insisting that she take a room nearby rather than stay with him in the quarters provided at the police station. Before their relationship can blossom murder strikes at the heart of the village: local beauty Annie Fleming opens a Valentine's Day parcel only to have it explode in her face, and a flurry of further killings has shaken the customary tranquility of the remote village.

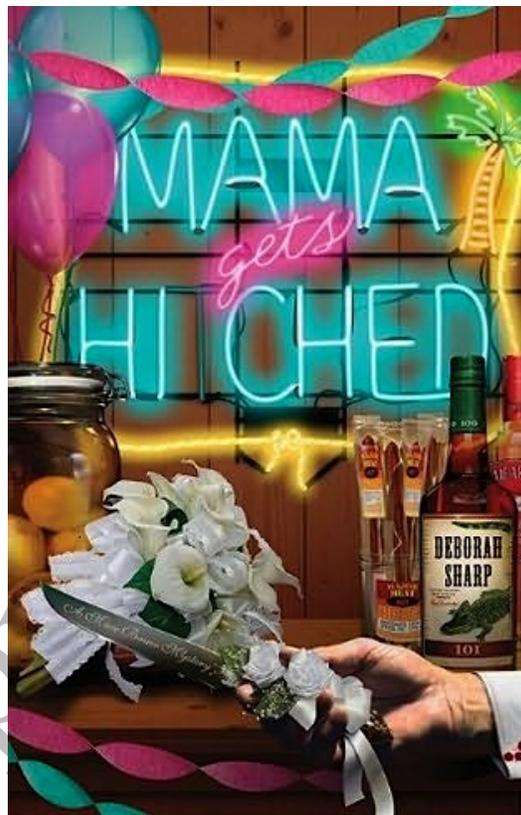
Hamish has misgivings about his upcoming nuptials, and when an old flame shows up for his wedding, matters are not improved. On the day of their union the villagers gather to celebrate the occasion, and just one question occupies Hamish's mind: how can he possibly get out of this? In the tiny rural village it will be a ceremony to remember.

M. C. Beaton (real name Marion Chesney) is an accomplished and skillful writer, with more than two dozen *Hamish Macbeth* tales to her credit – and that doesn't take into account an almost equal number of her Cotswold-based *Agatha Raisin* novels. If you seek a well-crafted, entertaining mystery tale populated by intriguing characters and set in colourful British surroundings, you simply cannot do better.

**Deborah Sharp,
Mama Gets Hitched
(Midnight Ink, 2010)**

For anyone who's ever been involved in a wedding, it will not come as news that they seldom come off exactly as planned. But there are limits. When middle-aged, over-the-top Mama Bauer arrives at a Central Florida reception hall to check on the final arrangements for no

less than her fifth trip down the aisle, a surprise awaits her: her caterer is in the kitchen, lying in a pool of blood, and definitely dead.



The wedding plans have hit a snag, but Mama is not easily deterred. The wedding will go on, planned by her own imitable hand: her pet Pomeranian will even be the ring-bearer on the glorious day, as she weds her latest catch, Salvatore Provenza. Her thirty-two-year-old daughter Mace is not surprised; a wildlife trapper by profession, nothing much intimidates her. But when someone leaves the severed head of a wild hog on the widow's front porch next door, Mace decides it's up to her to get to the bottom of things. While investigating the grisly crimes Mace finds herself saddled with Mama's efforts to hook her up with a police detective, an old relationship that had gone cool; and her quest to solve the murder will lead

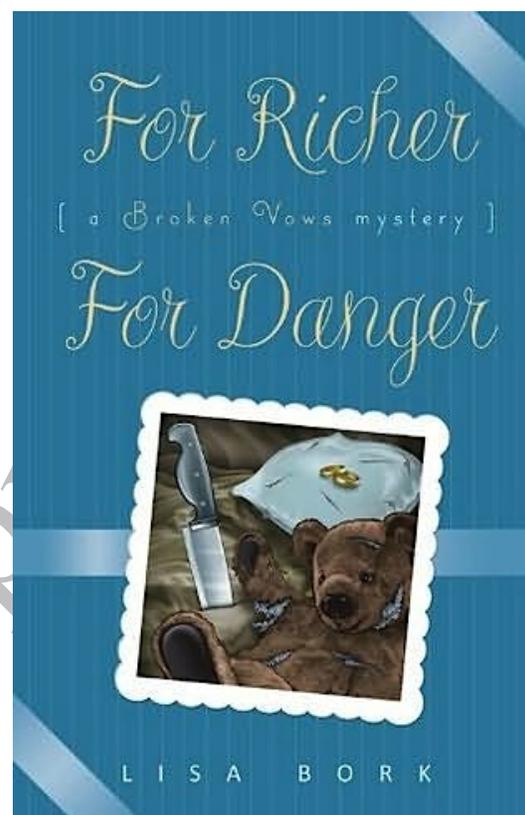
her from a fishing camp run by a local psychopath to a mysterious woman in black motorcycle leathers hanging around Mama's betrothed. All Mace has to do is ensure that her Mama's fiancé's not cheating on her and that the new caterer isn't a killer. As they say in the wedding business, a piece of cake...

Definitely the lighter side of crime, fans of *Mama Gets Hitched* can turn to Sharp's earlier tomes, *Mama Does Time* and *Mama Rides Shotgun* for more exploits featuring the plucky Mace Bauer, her irrepressible family, and the weirder side of living in bayou Florida.

Lisa Bork,
For Richer, for Danger
(Midnight Ink, 2010)

Her debut novel, *For Better, for Murder*, was a finalist for the 2009 Agatha Award for Best First Novel, and author Lisa Bork has followed it up with the second in her Broken Vows series, *For Richer, for Danger*. Picking up where her previous saga left off, we find Jolene Parker in the Finger Lakes region of western New York, struggling to sell a Ferrari from her boutique showroom of exotic sports cars. It's a challenge: the previous owner had been found dead behind the wheel, in her showroom. Her long-separated and almost ex-husband, Deputy Sheriff Ray Parker, had been understandably skeptical that she hadn't been responsible for the man's death, especially when it was revealed that they'd been dating – and arguing – in recent months. But after almost divorcing Jolene and Ray have patched things up, and the couple are even on track to adopt an infant, Noelle, when they hit a snag: it seems the birth mother has signed the adoption papers using the stolen identity of a dead teenager. Needing to clarify things for the

adoption, the couple set out to identify the real mother, only to find that she has become the prime suspect in a case of murder. When Ray hires an attractive ex-flame to defend the young woman in court, Jolene is understandably upset. Will their efforts to adopt Noelle bring them together, or drive them apart?



Author Lisa Bork has a good sense of setting, and her novels are populated with engaging if flawed characters, held together by plausible sub-plots. At times the mystery threatens to take a back seat to relationship issues, so her tales will appeal mostly to readers who enjoy family dramas leavened with a dash of gentle humour.

So there you have it: a trio of tales revolving around one of the oldest themes in fiction, love and marriage, and the often-uneasy relationship between them. The course of true love might not always run smooth, but readers can be

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sure that in each of these stories
everything will come right in the end.
For as they say, time wounds all heels...

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