

An Emancipated Woman

Winspear's Maisie Dobbs shines

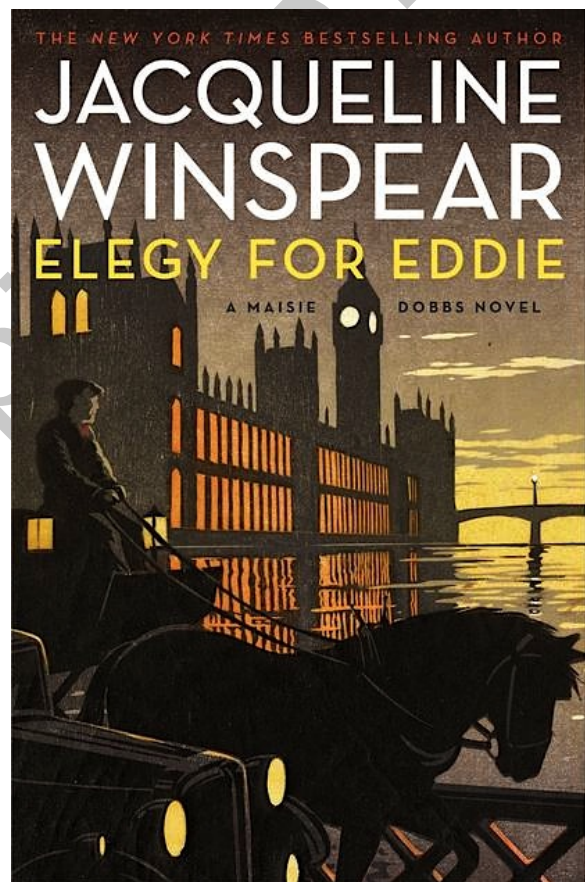
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Just when you've had your fill of crime-solving cats and serial killers, along comes a writer with a refreshingly original take on crime fiction. Since 2003 Jacqueline Winspear has been entertaining readers with the exploits of Maisie Dobbs, a private investigator based in London in the period between the wars. *Elegy for Eddie* is the ninth in the series. Along the way four books in the series have been nominated for Agatha and Edgar awards, with *Birds of a Feather* winning an Agatha for Best Novel of 2004.

The daughter of a costermonger, Maisie began her adult life as a maid in a Belgravia mansion. But her intelligence and curiosity quickly came to the attention of her wealthy employer, who joined forces with a family friend to make it possible for Maisie to pursue studies at Cambridge University. Briefly interrupted by service in the Great War as a nurse, Maisie has now become wealthy enough to invest in property, and her resources have allowed her to follow her passion—to open a private enquiry agency, now grown to include two assistants. Maisie has also developed a romantic but complex relationship with Viscount James Compton, the wealthy heir to a family fortune encompassing investments in both Britain and Canada. With her financial independence, her red MG open touring car, and her self-

assurance, Maisie is the very image of an emancipated modern woman of the 1930s.



**Jacqueline Winspear,
Elegy for Eddie
(HarperCollins, 2012)**

When Maisie arrives to open her office one morning she finds several men waiting for her. They are costermongers, friends of her father, and they have a case for her. Eddie Pettit, a man known to

them all, has been killed in a factory mishap: he died when a large roll of paper slipped off a belt and crushed him to death.

Eddie had always been a bit simple, and his life had centered on his special relationship with horses. During the Great War the army had recognised his talents and made him a groom, and he had served out the war looking after the army's stock on Hampstead Heath. In recent years Eddie had continued to tend horses in the various trades, cartage and delivery, that still relied on them. Lately, he had also run small errands for people at the paper mill.

The factory's management, along with the police, put his death down to a regrettable accident, but Eddie's friends are convinced it was murder. Complicating matters, the mill is but one link in a chain of investments owned by John Otterburn, who has business connections with Maisie's lover, James Compton.

Maisie pokes around the factory, asking how Eddie's death could have occurred, and is far from convinced that it was anything but an accident; but some things keep niggling at her. For one, Eddie's friends, and his mother, agree that something about Eddie had changed recently: he had become more quiet, and more withdrawn. For another, he had taken to keeping a notebook with drawings inside. The notebook is missing. When Maisie's assistant, Billy Beale

makes some enquiries on her behalf he is savagely beaten and hospitalized. And finally, Jimmy Merton, a young man who was said to have it in for Eddie, has apparently taken his own life.

Maisie's enquiries will strain her already-troubled relationship with James Compton, and push her inexorably toward a confrontation with the Industrialist John Otterburn, a man seemingly obsessed by the prospect of yet another world war. He seems curiously knowledgeable about the rise of a political firebrand in Germany named Adolf Hitler, and his circle of friends now includes a shadowy political figure by the name of Winston Churchill.

In this age of forensic procedurals, Winspear reminds us just how much solid investigative work is down to simple shoe leather and common sense. But it is not in solving puzzles that Winspear shines; it is in her detailed depiction of the times, and the portrayal of characters who so perfectly reflect their social positions, ranging from Maisie's wealthy paramour, James Compton, to the humble costermongers of her own childhood. She also captures the complex tempo of the period between the wars, and more subtly, the nuanced position of women in British society at all levels. A refreshing and entertaining tale with an engaging protagonist, *Elegy for Eddie* is the latest in a series of novels that begs to be filmed.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com