

Winners All

The Best Crime Fiction of 2015

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

One of the delights of the holiday season is being able to take a second look at each of the crime novels I've read over the past twelve months and select the very best. All too often, halfway through the year I despair, wondering whether my year-end list of notables will be paired down to two books, or even a single, mention. This year, I'm delighted to say, it's been an embarrassment of riches. So here, in alphabetical order, are my picks for the outstanding works of crime fiction over the preceding twelve months. Throw a dart: any one you hit will be well worth your time. Better yet, get hold of them all and indulge yourself.

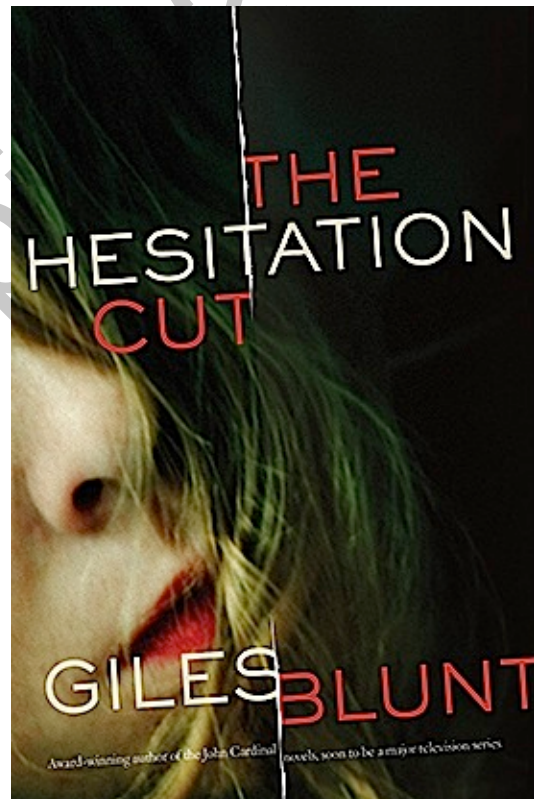
Giles Blunt,

The Hesitation Cut

(Random House Canada)

One of Canada's most accomplished writers, Giles Blunt's series of John Cardinal crime novels ranks among the best ever set on paper. But his latest work is a standalone, and it's a winner. Brother William is quietly tending a monastery library in upstate New York when a young woman named Lauren Wolfe arrives to do some research. As she works at a library table he observes cut marks on her wrists, clear signs of a suicide

attempt. Captivated by her beauty and intelligence, William becomes concerned for her, and when Lauren finishes her research and leaves the monastery he abandons his vocation



to follow her to New York City. It's not long before William takes on a new identity – or rather, his former one, and becomes Peter. He takes a job in a bookstore to sustain himself, and tracks Lauren down, and even managing to move into her apartment building. Peter's only aim is to

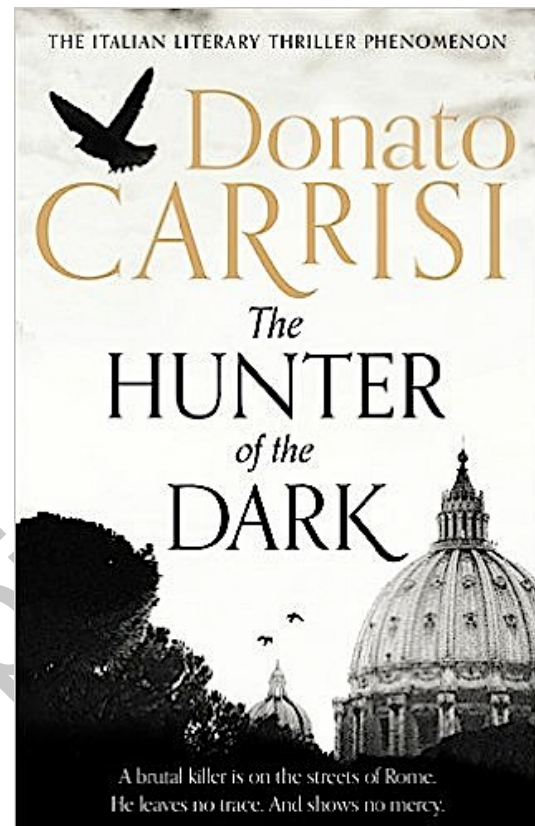
protect Lauren from harm. It turns out that she could use the help: she is in a toxic relationship with a controlling (and out-of-control) man who threatens to drag her, once again, into his own dark and very twisted lifestyle. But it's a dangerous game Peter is playing, and before it has ended he will find himself in jeopardy. Blunt's evocative and insightful take on obsession and its consequences will remain with you long after you finish the book.

**Donato Carrisi,
*Hunter of the Dark (Abacus)***

The Italian novelist Donato Carrisi is well-known to European readers, having garnered four Italian literature prizes for his bestselling novel *The Whisperer*, as well as for *The Lost Girls of Rome*, and *The Vanished Ones*. In *The Hunter of the Dark* Carrisi enters what at first glance appears to be Dan Brown territory, to produce a tale melding ancient secret societies with contemporary crimes. But don't let that put you off; persevere and you will be rewarded with a literate and plausible tale of twisted lives, innocent victims, and dark secrets long harboured by those within the Church of Rome.

As the day ends the many visitors to Vatican City are quietly moved to the exits with no explanation given. The Swiss Guards secure all the entrances, the phone lines to the outside world, including the mobile signal, are all severed. The staff members, both lay and ecclesiastical, are invited to return to their homes. Almost alone in the Papal grounds a priest named Marcus, together with his mentor

Clemente, make their way to a small wooded area, where they view the remains of a nun: she's been stripped of her clothing and murdered, her arms and legs severed from her body.



The Vatican authorities have taken charge: the Italian police have no jurisdiction within the grounds, and it has been decided that there will be no forensic examination, no autopsy, no recording of fingerprints, no DNA evidence gathered. Instead, it will be left to Clemente and Marcus to solve the crime themselves and end the evil that has penetrated their sacrosanct world. Clemente explains that "There is a place in which the world of light meets the world of darkness." Marcus is told that he has a gift, the ability to recognize the signs of evil. He is, Clemente says, a *penitenziere*, a hunter of the dark, and his task is to

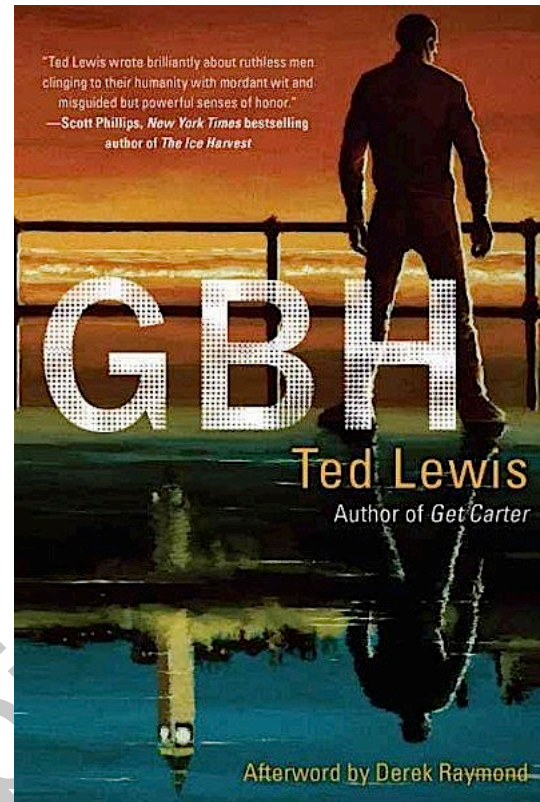
discover the perpetrator of that heinous crime, and prevent him from killing again. He will not be able to fulfill both parts of that mission, and his work will be cut out for him simply to prevent becoming yet another of the victims. A superbly crafted and layered exploration of the roots of psychosis, wrapped around a fine suspense tale.

**Ted Lewis, *GBH*
(Soho Crime)**

Best known for creating what became the Jack Carter series of tales in the 1970s, British author Ted Lewis penned a total of nine novels until his untimely death, at the age of forty, in 1982. They're all taut, spare portrayals of somehow endearing anti-heroes caught up in a web of violence. None is better than *Jack's Return Home*, made famous as the iconic Michael Caine film *Get Carter*. But Lewis's final novel, *GBH*, is quite simply a noir masterpiece, a stunningly-written case study in the importance of structure and style. Reissued in 2015 by Soho Crime, and furnished with an incisive afterword by Derek Raymond, it is a timeless gem and belongs in the very top tier of crime writing.

It's the late 1970s, and London baddie George Fowler heads a well-organised and profitable criminal syndicate that produces what used to be called "blue films" — illegal pornography. But someone within the organization is fouling Fowler's nest, skimming his profits and jeopardizing his control. As he seeks out the traitor he begins to doubt everyone around

him, even his closest allies. Suspicion poisons the atmosphere,

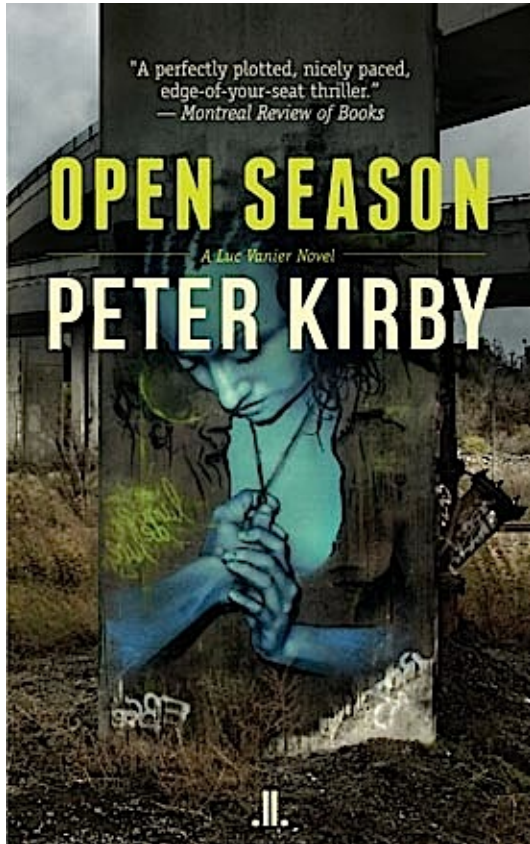


and Fowler retreats to a secluded getaway in Northern England. But a beguiling young woman appears on the scene, and despite his misgivings Fowler allows her into his life. It is a decision that will permanently alter his life.

**Peter Kirby,
Open Season
(Linda Leith)**

Over the short space of three novels Montreal author Peter Kirby has established himself as a serious contender in the Canadian literary world, and someone to be watched. Each of his tales raises a disturbing social issue and treats it intelligently and with compassion, while carefully balancing the need for convincing characters and structured suspense.

Kirby's latest work focuses on the plight of illegal immigrants in Canada, vulnerable people in search of a better life, yet who all too often find themselves at the mercy of callous thugs who hold them captive and force them into the sex trade. A South



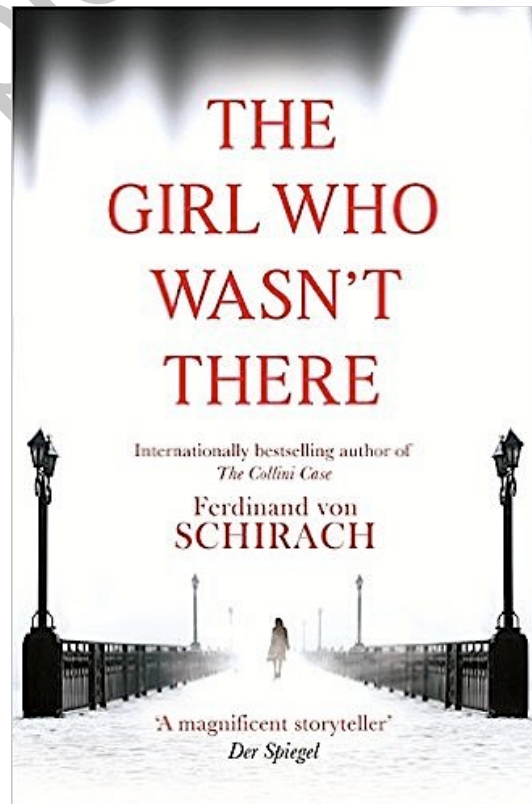
American journalist is working to expose the racket when she disappears and her lawyer's office is ransacked. It falls to Montreal police detective Luc Vanier and his partner, Sergeant Sylvie Saint-Jacques to solve her kidnapping and rescue the imprisoned women. The plot lines are seamlessly interwoven, the settings convincing, and the action builds to a compelling climax, and Kirby even finds time to turn the spotlight on the federal authorities who are supposed to be applying a compassionate

DeadlyDiversions.com
Celebrating the best in crime fiction

policy toward refugees. *Open Season* combines a penetrating and intelligent look at an important social issue with a carefully-crafted and entertaining crime novel.

**Frederick von Schirach,
The Girl Who Wasn't There
(Little, Brown)**

An original and profoundly disturbing novel, *The Girl Who Wasn't There* is a layered puzzle mystery set in Germany. The story moves through decades of a man's life, from his difficult childhood to his career as a successful photographic artist, until he is charged with a horrific crime. In his early years Sebastian von Eschburg endures an almost total lack of affection in his family, culminating



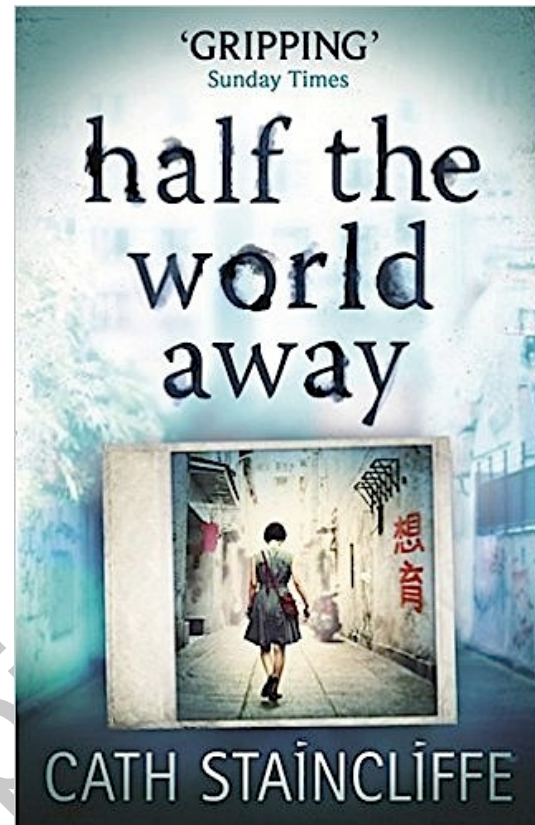
in his father's suicide. His mother is scarcely more attentive to the boy

than her husband had been, and sends him away to boarding school so that she might sell the family home and possessions, and take a lover who openly despises him. Life there is scarcely better for Sebastian, and when he is diagnosed as suffering from hallucinations, he learns to become even more circumspect around others. On leaving school Sebastian apprentices with a well-known photographer, easily moving into a world of ephemeral images that allows him to express his fantasies, and through them he gains fame and, even more importantly, the approval of others. But when Sebastian is accused of a brutal crime, and evidence is found in the boot of his car, he finds himself arrested for murder. He withdraws once more within himself, and ultimately confesses to the crime, although the body is nowhere to be found. The ending contains an unexpected and shocking twist that will force readers to examine their most basic assumptions about the nature of guilt and of truth itself.

Cath Staincliffe,
Half the World Away
(Constable & Robinson)

One of the most accomplished of today's British crime writers, Cath Staincliffe's standalones never disappoint. In her latest, a graduating student named Lori Maddox decides to spend her gap year in Asia, photographing her travels and posting her adventures on a blog site. She's very level-headed, so her parents do not worry unduly. At first things go well, and Lori writes that she's gone

to China with a new-found friend, and has a job teaching English to



locals. But when her posts cease they become concerned. After several weeks her mother and her ex-husband (and Lori's father) set out on their own to track her down. Their journey is a harrowing and cautionary tale, as they find themselves in a closed society, unable to speak the language and ill-equipped to deal with ordinary strangers and the authorities, who seem more concerned with preserving the country's image as a safe tourist destination than helping them to locate their daughter. Staincliffe effectively portrays the challenges confronting every parent: when to let go of one's children, and what to do when things begin to go wrong. A superbly crafted suspense tale that will leave

readers satisfied, yet profoundly
disturbed.

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, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

© Jim Napier 2015