

Lies and Whispers

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

This week's pick is a neo-noir, a dark and cynical tale set in the Hollywood of the 1940's, a city populated by flawed people powered by petty ambitions and national agendas. It is a gripping story of suspicion and deception, lies and innuendoes. And it is all the more compelling because it is grounded in fact.

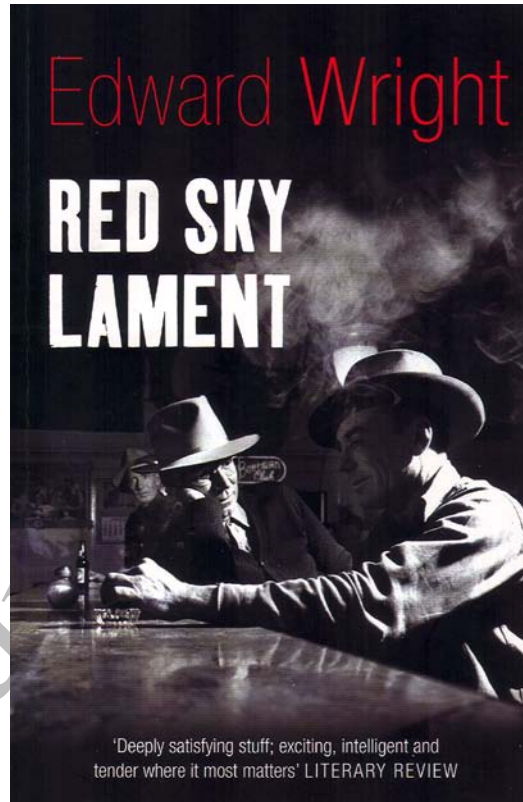
Edward Wright

One of the shining new faces on the mystery scene. Edward Wright's first novel, *Clea's Moon*, won the CWA Debut Dagger for Best First Novel in 2004. His second, *The Silver Face*, garnered the 2005 Shamus Award for Best Mystery of the Year. *Red Sky Lament* is his third novel in the John Ray Horn series. A journalist by training, Wright is currently working on a stand-alone mystery-thriller set in present-day rural east Tennessee.

Red Sky Lament (Orion Books, 2006)

L.A., in the late 1940's; in the early days of the Cold War American politicians are searching for Communists under every bed, and it is not long before they focus their attentions on Hollywood — then, as now, a hotbed of liberal politics.

Owen Bruder, a once-successful Hollywood screenwriter has been summoned before the powerful House Un-American Activities Committee for allegedly being



a member of the Communist Party. He is a proud man, and refuses to buckle under the intimidating tactics of the committee chairman, J. Parnell Thomas, and his chief investigator, Mitchell Cross. Plainclothes detectives station themselves outside Bruder's house, observing his every move, while he steels himself for prison. In desperation, Bruder's daughter Maggie hires John Ray Horn, an ex-B-movie star and friend, to identify her father's accuser; but before he can get very far, Bruder is killed. A proud man in his own right, Horn resolves to discover Bruder's killer; his investigation will sweep

everyone up in a firestorm that is both metaphorical and literal.

Both nostalgic and ominous

Many of the characters in *Red Sky Lament* are thinly-veiled takeoffs on actual persons who played key roles during the very real Red Scare that took place in America during the McCarthy era. Owen Bruder is clearly based on the celebrated screenwriter and novelist Dashiell Hammett. Bruder's wife Lillian is, of course, Hammett's real-life partner Lillian Hellman, and his daughter Margo mirrors Hammett's actual daughter, Mary. J. Parnell Thomas is — surprise — J. Parnell Thomas: in real life (as in the story) the powerful Chairman of the House Unamerican Activities Committee. His assistant, Mitchell Cross bears a more-than-passing resemblance to the infamous Roy Cohn, henchman for the committee. Gossip-columnists Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper also have roles to play (though curiously through fictitious columnist Laura Lee Paisley). The cast of characters is rounded out by Horn's friends from his acting days, studio heads, their wives and girlfriends, and the inevitable hangers-on, all looking to protect their interests. Passing mention is given to the actual actors — Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, Edward G. Robinson, Danny Kaye and Gene Kelly, who stood bravely against the prevailing political winds of the day — and others, like Robert Taylor, who did not. Even the fabled Woody Gruthie has a role to play in this tale lifted effortlessly from real life.

Red Sky Lament relies heavily on the history of the period in its depiction of both events and key players. It is, however, an original story, weaving fact and fiction together seamlessly, and in

the process taking the reader back to a place and a time that manages to be both nostalgic and ominous. It is a world of cherry cokes in corner drugstores, Grauman's Chinese Theater and Wiltshire Boulevard, once-grand hotels that were the playgrounds of the rich and famous, secluded estates in the San Fernando Valley, and horse farms located in the arid hills north of the city. The people, too, are real, lifted from the headlines and bylines of the papers of the day. The story is not only plausible, it is at times all too real: it reminds us of a time and a state of mind that we might prefer to forget, and which is all too relevant today. Judged by each of these benchmarks, *Red Sky Lament* is a fine read.

Jim Napier can be reached at
jim.napier52@gmail.com