

Everything old is new again

Traditional novel an impressive debut

Suspended Sentences

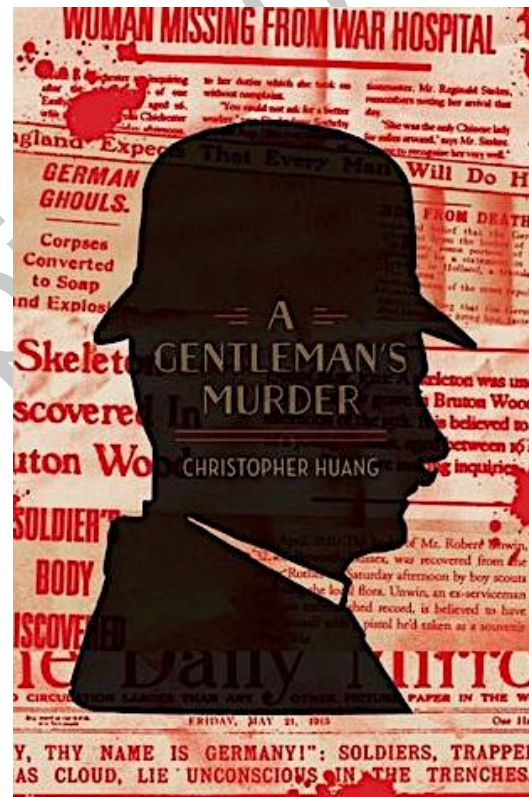
by Jim Napier

London, 1924. The city, the nation, and indeed the world are struggling to deal with the after-effects of the Great War. One measure of this effort is the Britannia Club, a refuge for soldiers who have seen active service. And one of its more idiosyncratic members is ex-Lieutenant Eric Peterkin, late of the Royal Fusiliers. Eric is the mixed-race son of an English nobleman and his Chinese wife. His heritage is there for everyone to see, and as a result he is often the subject of racial slights and ethnic slurs.

But as a veteran of the war, Eric is nonetheless a member of the club to which preceding generations of Peterkins have belonged. One day, in a conversation in one of the club's reception rooms, a new member is introduced: Albert Benson would not normally be eligible for membership in the Britannia Club, having been a conscientious objector during the war; but having served on the battlefield as a stretcher-bearer he has been granted admission, which Peterkin finds admirable.

The man is out of his depth, though, and before long he is goaded into a wager by another member. Mortimer Wolfe is an arrogant snob, and bets a substantial amount of money that he

can break into the club's safe-deposit boxes and remove an item from Benson's box within the coming twenty-four hours.



The club's president, Edward Aldershott, accepts the challenge and he, Peterkin, and Benson go off to verify just what is in the box that day.

The next day Albert Benson is nowhere to be seen, but Mortimer Wolfe sweeps into the club precisely at the appointed hour and dramatically drops a small parcel on a table.

It contains a pair of surgical scissors, which Aldershott and Peterkin know to have been in the box. But other objects that were also there are nowhere in sight. Wolfe insists that, except for a hypodermic kit he left in the box, the scissors were the only objects there. When Peterkin challenges this account, they decide to check the box out for themselves.

But when they arrive at the vault they find Benson on the vault floor, the handle of a small knife protruding from his neck.

The murder of Albert Benson is of course the core puzzle at the heart of this novel, but equally important are the nuanced relationships between the various members of the Britannia Club and those close to them. Postwar Britain was a complex mix of damaged soldiers who returned from the Great War, along with nurses who cared for them both on the battlefield and in war hospitals back in England. Most soldiers came home scarred, often mentally as well as physically, and depended, often daily, on narcotics to cope with their suffering. Added to the mix were the parents, family members, and lovers, who had marked the time at home during the war, and now struggle to deal with

the war's after-effects. And although the war was presumably fought to safeguard the basic tenets of democracy, strong currents remained in Britain of the class divisions that were present before the war. Not least, there were racist prejudices that men like Eric Peterson, himself a half-caste of partial Chinese descent, faced on a daily basis.

Plenty of food for thought, then, and author Christopher Huang expertly weaves these various threads into a rich tapestry that is both entertaining as a traditional whodunit and a compelling portrait of post-war England as it struggles to emerge from the protracted horrors of war on a scale the world had never before seen.

A Gentleman's Murder is stylish, perceptive, witty, and informed. The characters are perfectly of their time and place, the action well paced, the plot set against the grim events of history. And it is an eloquent tribute to those who survived the war only to struggle with the peace. It is an ambitious undertaking rich in social commentary and historical atmosphere, and a very impressive debut.

A Gentleman's Murder is published by Inkshares Press, 2018.

Since 2005 more than 500 of 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*. His debut crime novel *Legacy* was published in the Spring of 2017, and the second in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled for release in the Fall of 2018. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com