

Private Lives

What if nowhere was safe?

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

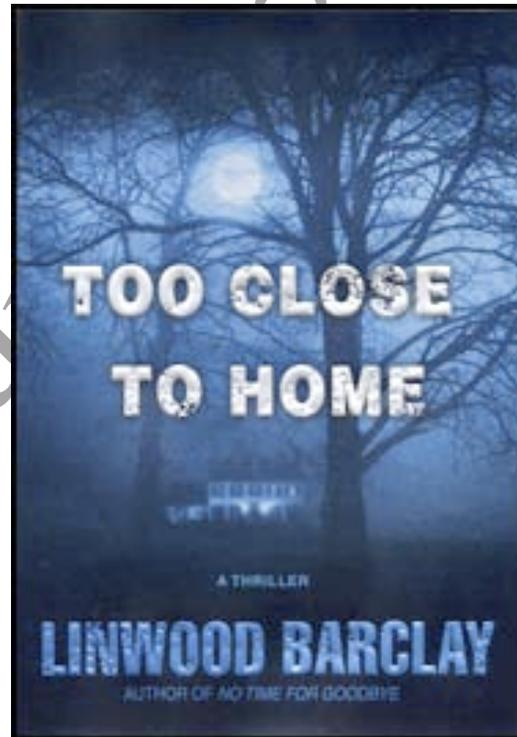
Most people lead public and private lives. Part of our time we spend in the company of others, conducting business, earning a living, and generally socializing. But no matter what our occupation or interests, we look at home as someplace sacrosanct, a place to retire from the problems of the world, a refuge where we can put aside the craziness and find order and some small measure of tranquility.

Imagine, then, if that private and ordered space were somehow turned upside down, if a formless violence, beyond our comprehension, somehow invaded our private lives and threatened our very existence. This is the premise underlying this week's thriller, and it is a question that no one ever wants to address.

Linwood Barclay

Regular readers of this column will recognize the name of Linwood Barclay. Author of the highly successful series of comedic crime novels chronicling the manic exploits of Zack Walker (*Bad Move*, *Bad Guys*, *Lone Wolf*, and *Stone Rain*), Barclay branched out in new directions a little over a year ago with his standalone thriller, *No Time for Goodbye*. It proved to be his breakout novel, becoming the bestselling novel

for 2008 in the UK, and selling over half a million copies in Germany alone.



But Barclay doesn't fit the popular conception of a thriller writer. A genial man with a strong sense of humour, he doesn't sport the shaved head or slightly menacing goatee affected by many authors in the genre; and if he were to try to stare you down, he'd likely cause you to break into a laugh, betrayed by the mischievous glint in his eyes. A devoted family man, one suspects that Barclay's own private space is less

defined by the four walls of his home than by what goes on in his head when he's utterly alone. It's a thought that doesn't bear too much attention.

Barclay, his wife Neetha and their two grown children live in Burlington, Ontario.

Too Close to Home
(Bantam Books, 2008)

Jim Cutter is a forty-two year old landscape gardener. He and his wife Ellen and their teenage son Derek live in Promise Falls, a small town in upstate New York, far away from the violence of the big city. Their lives are predictable, even humdrum; after all, nothing ever happens in Promise Falls. Cutter's biggest challenges are coping with the town mayor, Randall Finley, a philandering jerk he once punched in the nose, and putting up with Ellen's pompous boss, Conrad Chase, the local college president, with whom Ellen had had an affair. The nearest neighbors are the Langleys, who live just down the lane. But all is not tranquil in Eden: the Cutters' lives are changed forever when their neighbors are brutally murdered.

As a trial lawyer, Albert Langley had successfully defended people accused of vicious crimes, which didn't make him a lot of friends in Promise Falls. At first it seems the family was killed by the outraged father of one of Langley's clients, a theory strengthened when the suspect commits suicide as the police close in on him.

But Cutter isn't so sure. The only thing missing from the murder scene is a computer that Derek Cutter had been given, which he loaned to the Langley's son. Derek had kept a disk copy of a file on it, though, and showed it to his father. It was a draft of a novel, a coming-of-

age story with gay overtones, written several years earlier by a high school student who had later died in a fall from a bridge. And as Jim Cutter recognized, it was also the basis for a best-selling book the world thought had been written by Conrad Chase, Ellen's boss and former lover. When Cutter confronts Chase he denies any involvement in either the Langley's deaths or the boy's fall from the bridge. He insists he wrote the book himself; but the fact that he has been unable to follow it up with a sequel raises flags for Cutter.

Cutter believes Chase is responsible for the killings and that the computer disk holds the key. Ellen is adamant, though, that her boss couldn't be involved, and resists her husband's suggestion that they take the disk to the police. The rift puts new tensions on the already-stressed family, and threatens to drive them apart.

Then things take an ominous turn. When it's revealed that Derek was in the Langley's house when the murders occurred—a fact he's carefully withheld from everyone, even his parents—the police focus on him as a suspect; and when they uncover a motive, they arrest Derek for the crime.

Just when Jim and Ellen Cutter think things couldn't get worse, it begins to look like the killers went to the wrong house; could they have been targeting the Cutters? It's not long before Cutter gets his answer.

As Jim Cutter tries to clear his son, the circle of violence tightens around the family, and he finds himself out of his depth, struggling against a nameless enemy with his own agenda. Help will come from an unexpected direction.

Barclay's best work to date

Linwood Barclay has served up a dandy crossover crime novel: a cozy thriller. A suspense tale with a puzzle at its heart, it necessarily includes some violence; but for the most part it is not gritty, and the violence is never gratuitous. Along the way Barclay asks questions that strike disturbingly close to home about how easy it is to get caught up in other people's lives, whether things are ever what they seem, and no matter where we live, whether we are ever really safe.

Too Close to Home is a compelling, intricately-plotted thriller, full of twists and turns and red herrings, and populated by characters that are all too believable; and although Barclay deals with such conflict-ridden themes as ambition, deceit, vengeance, and accountability, he avoids the easy road of substituting gore for plot. It is Barclay's best work to date, in a series of novels that goes from strength to strength.

Jim Napier can be reached at

jim.napier52@gmail.com



© Jim Napier 2009