

Old sins and new beginnings

Canadian author explores close relationships

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

There are many truisms in book publishing, most of which are false. One of the most firmly entrenched is that novels set in Canada – at least outside large, well-known cities – won't sell. By now you'd think that had been pretty well debunked, what with the global success of bestselling authors like Louise Penny, Giles Blunt, and Gail Bowen. Adding to the growing list of writers who set their tales in some of the more picturesque byways of Canada, Vicki Delany has penned a series of entertaining tales featuring a determined young uniformed officer who struggles to make her adult life among those who only knew her in her youth as "Moonbeam," and who must wrestle daily with small-town attitudes while trying to do a big-city job. It is a distinctive setting that Delany skillfully exploits to produce compelling tales. Yet another example, if one were needed, that quality writing knows no national boundaries.

Negative Image
(Poisoned Pen Press, 2010)

In the small mountain resort town of Trafalgar, B.C., Constable Molly Smith is summoned to the upscale Hudson House Hotel when a guest, former world-class fashion photographer Rudolph Steiner, is found dead in his room, the victim of a bullet to the back of the head. A straightforward homicide, if

murder can ever be called straightforward.

But evidence is thin. There were no eyewitnesses, only a hotel employee who says he saw an unidentified woman leave Steiner's room about the time he died. Not a lot to go on.



When Detective Sergeant John Winters investigates, the case takes a bizarre turn: a forensics officer hands Winters a pornographic photo of a young woman found at the scene. It's small, and obviously taken decades ago, but there's no mistaking the subject: it's John

Winters' wife, Eliza, a former high-fashion model. Winters pockets the photo, struggling with the sleazy image of the woman he loves, trying to make some sense of his life. Significantly, he fails to turn over the damning evidence to his colleagues, aware that he is crossing over a line from which he cannot easily return.

But even death presents opportunities. The murder is seen as a blessing by Meredith Morgenstern, a ruthless local reporter with aspirations to leave the sleepy town for greener pastures. She badgers the victim's widow and shamelessly manipulates friends to gain access to confidential information in the hopes of getting a scoop.

Trafalgar has a tiny police force, so the chief calls in IHIT, the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team. It's not long before two Mounties show up, and Winters' life only gets worse. The senior officer, Dick Madison, is an arrogant and opinionated, contemptuous of his small-town colleagues and overbearing in his conduct of the case. When confidential aspects of the case are revealed in the press, Madison uses the leak as an excuse to tighten his control over the investigation.

Sometimes the taciturn detective is his own worst enemy. Winters absolutely adores his wife, but the photograph and all it portends, threatens the very foundation of their marriage. He confronts his wife over the photo and they argue; Winters tells her she must come clean about her involvement with Steiner. Calling Madison, he informs him that he's found the woman seen in the hotel hallway, and takes Eliza to the station. With his wife's admission that she knew the victim Winters is removed from the case, and he can only hope that Madison

keeps an open mind, though the evidence is against it.

Winters moves to a nearby motel, realising that it's only a matter of time before their lives become public knowledge and fodder for the press. With the IHIT team focused on the homicide, Winters and Molly are assigned to follow up on a series of burglaries that have recently plagued the town. The move will turn out to have unexpected consequences.

While Molly struggles to understand Winters' increasingly strange behaviour, an old nemesis appears on the scene. Charlie Bassing had assaulted her best friend Christa, and Molly had seen to it that he spent four months behind bars for his sins. Now he's out and under court order to stay away from Christa, and blaming Molly for his problems. Picking his moments carefully, he confronts Molly in a series of thinly-veiled threats. The young officer is reluctant to report him, unwilling to be seen as a woman who can't handle her own problems. It's a no-win situation with deadly repercussions down the road, and as events move inexorably toward their climax, Molly will find herself fighting for her life.

Readers can only hope for more

An insightful exploration of how events in the past can return to haunt us, in the fourth of her Constable Molly Smith series author Vicki Delany shows clear evidence of her emerging mastery of crime writing. There is no dearth of suspects in this complex, layered tale, and it would be easy for a less experienced writer to lose focus in the welter of detail; but Delany manages to move easily between the several story lines while holding the reader firmly in her grasp, and her ear for convincing

dialogue is spot on. Her characters are complex and engaging – well, at least most of them – and the result is a carefully crafted, engrossing read. Delany is steadily making her way toward the top tier of Canadian crime writers, and readers can only hope for more adventures as the plucky Molly Smith struggles to move from the shadow of her family and town to meet life on her own terms.

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