

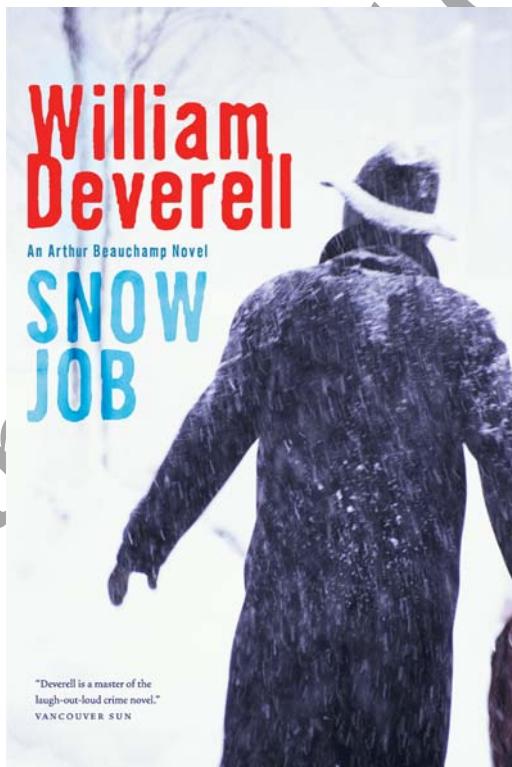
Oh Canada!

Crime saga lampoons Canadian politics

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Democratic governments typically pay a lot of lip service to the importance of the free flow of information, and the role of the Fourth Estate — the Press — in promoting an informed electorate. In reality, of course, the situation is somewhat different: politicians who are staunch critics of government secrecy while in the Opposition, once they become the ruling party often adopt a siege mentality, seeing every inquiry into their actions as a threat to their rule, and make every effort to stonewall attempts by outsiders to penetrate the insulated corridors of power. In recent weeks we have been treated to the venal duplicity of an aide to a federal cabinet minister who tried to work around the legal niceties of the Access to Information Act to prevent a certain document from seeing the cruel light of day. Small potatoes of course, compared to the machinations of the Nixon administration during the 70's known collectively as Watergate. But both examples remind us that freedom is never cheap: it must constantly be striven for, and the price for failure is ultimately the loss of democracy itself. This week's crime-fiction pick deals with the uneasy alliance between politics and power.



William Deverell

I last reviewed one of William Deverell's novels (*April Fool*) in June of 2007. At the time I noted his many contributions to Canadian entertainment, first as the originator of the highly successful CBC TV series *Street Legal*, and later as the multiple-award-winning author of more than a dozen delightful crime novels. Several of his tales are standalones, while others feature the exploits of retired BC criminal lawyer Arthur Beauchamp. The wily advocate

is back, and with a vengeance, in Deverell's latest saga.

Looking more than a little like W. O. Mitchell in his later years, Deverell and his wife Tekla divide their time between their Gulf Islands home and a Spanish-style hacienda located on Costa Rica's South Central coast. Sometimes you just have to grin and bear it.

Snow Job (McClelland & Stewart, 2009)

Arthur Beauchamp is a perennial thorn in the side of the Establishment. He makes his home among the counter-culture freethinkers of Garibaldi Island with his wife Margaret Blake, the opposition-based Member of Parliament for Cowichan and the Islands. Mavericks both, they are only grudgingly tolerated within the political establishment, and constantly at odds with the powers that be.

When a cabinet-level delegation from the Central Asian republic of Bhashyistan proposes a visit to Canada, certain Canadian industrialists are pleased: the nation is rich in oil and natural gas deposits, and a Calgary-based company is working hard to establish insider status with the fledgling republic. On the other hand, human rights and pro-democracy advocates are outraged: the head of state is a dictatorial megalomaniac known colloquially as Mad Igor. They want no part of a visit that can only serve to legitimize his oppressive regime.

Complicating things, the country's dictatorial former president — Mad Igor's father — had been assassinated in Vancouver some years earlier, allegedly by a Bhashyistani dissident residing in Canada. Abzal Erzhan had been tried in Canada, but the government's case had

fallen apart; represented by Beauchamp's law firm, Erzhan was acquitted and later moved to Montreal, where he became a schoolteacher. Still on the loose, then, and in the eyes of Canadian security officials, a potential threat.

The federal cabinet realizes that a visit by a Bhashyistani delegation is bound to stir up protests, perhaps even a demand for a formal apology from the Canadian government for dropping the ball during the suspect's trial. A few human-rights sympathizers within the cabinet are opposed to the proposed jaunt, but the prospect of expanded oil revenues proves to be too tempting to resist, and the delegation is invited to visit Ottawa.

The state visit goes pleasantly enough, all things considered, until the delegation departs in a line of limousines. As they cross a bridge leading to the airport there is a blinding flash and an ominous column of dark smoke, followed by flames engulfing the remnants of the motorcade. The entire Bhashyistani delegation — much of that nation's cabinet, together with their chauffeur and ambassador — are killed.

So far, admittedly not a lot of laughs. But the mayhem turns quickly to mirth as a shocked Canadian cabinet reacts to a political disaster of unprecedented scope. As the plot unfolds readers are treated to an insider's look at the lighter side of political crisis management, replete with a disappearing schoolteacher, the threatened shoot-down of a Bhashyistani government plane, Canadian oil executives held hostage in Bhashyistan, a small band of naïve Canadian tourists trying to extricate themselves from the international turmoil that has overtaken them, a declaration of war by the megalomaniac president of Bhashyistan, rumours of an

attempted coup, and the enigmatic behaviour of a CSIS agent with a chequered past who's been tasked with tailing Arthur Beauchamp as they travel together to Bhashyistan in a clandestine effort to achieve damage control. Did I mention the senior cabinet minister who manages to get himself into more than a spot of bother in an Ottawa hotel room?

Guaranteed to bring a smile

Delving into the murky world of political intrigue William Deverell provides yet another lighthearted poke at the establishment. Featuring a PM who is out of his depth — think Stephen Harper meets Harpo Marx (on second thought, just think Stephen Harper) — Deverell serves up an entertaining and instructive tale. A fast-moving, penetrating look at Canadian politics in a novel that is not so much satire as parody, *Snow Job* is guaranteed to bring a smile to your face while giving you pause for reflection. It's hard to say which is best, Deverell's antic plotting, his mordant narrative, or his unerring ability to create side-splitting dialogue. Black comedy at its best, fans of all political persuasions will find something to like, and a great deal to laugh at, in *Snow Job*.

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



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