

# When Art Imitates Life:

## *Courtroom novel is autobiographical thriller*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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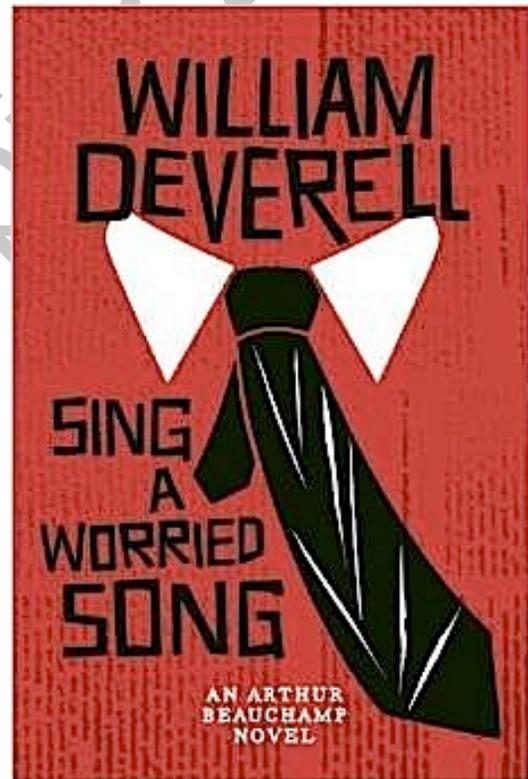
by Jim Napier

With eighteen crime novels to his credit, along with the creation of the CBC classic series, *Street Legal*, William Deverell has long been a fixture in Canadian crime-writing circles. A recurring feature of many of his novels has been a strong comic element, in which he often lampoons the Establishment, whether it's the police or political figures – or more often, both. But his latest work, *Sing a Worried Song*, has a distinctly darker tone, and not without reason, as it reveals a more sombre side of the law.

April, 1987: following a weekend party at a Vancouver pub eighteen days earlier, capped off by a brief spell in the local slammer, lawyer Arthur Beauchamp has gone dry, and not before time. He's facing one of the most formidable challenges of his career, and the outcome of this case will take decades and fundamentally alter Arthur's life.

For the first time in his career Arthur Beachamp, normally a defense lawyer, is acting for the Crown, prosecuting a young man accused of killing a local indigent. It is the second time around for this case, the first having

resulted in a deadlocked jury, and the Attorney-General, facing a severe case of egg on his face, has persuaded Beauchamp into leading the prosecution.



The case has been presented in the press as a thrill killing. The victim, Joyal Chumpy, was known locally as Chumpy the Clown, and had no enemies. For the past decade he'd been a local fixture on city streets, playing his harmonica and honking

his bright red nose for the kids. He was found in his Skid Row apartment, bleeding from several deep knife wounds.

In the first trial his alleged assailant, Randolph Skyler, was portrayed as a twenty-three-year-old spoiled brat from a well-to-do family who'd killed for kicks. Not an endearing figure then, and Beauchamp expects the public to be behind him on this one. The Crown's trump card in the case is Manfred Ungar, a friend of Skyler's and a military cadet at RMC Kingston.

Complicating Beauchamp's life is his battle with the bottle, and his faithless wife Annabelle. He expects to use the former to gain some sympathy with the jury, and as for the latter – well, he hopes his wife would mind her manners, at least until the trial had ended. He doesn't need the distractions.

In Regina v. Skyler, the case for the prosecution consists of a number of empty beer bottles in the victim's apartment, one of which contained a partial thumb-print of the accused. That and the testimony of Skylar's friend Ungar, who in the first trial said that Skylar came into his room sometime after midnight, with blood on his leg, waking Ungar and saying "He wouldn't die. I must have stabbed him ten times, and he wouldn't die."

On the face of it, then, Beauchamp has been handed a prosecutor's dream: a mostly clear-cut case with physical evidence, the damning testimony of a close friend, and a dislikeable defendant. But in the law,

no less than in the real world, things have a habit of going wrong. The fly in this particular ointment is a reluctant witness with memory issues. And Beauchamp faces a worthy, if somewhat slimy opponent: defense counsel Brian Pomeroy managed to get a hung jury in the first trial, and shows no sign of letting down the side the second time around.

But shortly after the jury reaches its decision, Arthur Beauchamp fears that his troubles are only beginning; and the events set in motion will take decades to play themselves out.

By September of 2012 Beauchamp has moved on. His latest case – into which he has been reluctantly dragged – involves a fellow resident of Garibaldi Island, off Vancouver. The man has been charged with trafficking in pot, and an officious and obsessive law officer has teamed up with an ambitious prosecutor to see that he is convicted. As the local lawyer on the island, and a long-standing neighbour, Beauchamp is faced with defending a man whose erratic behavior and candour makes him his own worst enemy. But as he grapples with an apparently unwinnable case, he is confronted by something far more ominous: Randolph Skyler has surfaced once again.

As I mentioned above, at its core *Sing A Worried Song* is largely autobiographical. An inverted mystery in the tradition of Columbo, the theme is not whodunnit, but rather, will he be tripped up, and if so, how. It then becomes a thriller, but in the best sense of the word, relying not on

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barrister-in-distress theatrics but on a solid plot, well told.

Well-paced, with a layered plot, nuanced characters, and occasional flashes of humour revealed in courtroom parrying and the antics of the eccentric (not to say addled) denizens

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of Garibaldi Island, *Sing A Worried Song* is a fine courtroom drama, and much more. And in an afterword Deverell reveals in detail just how closely the story is based on his own experience.

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Since 2005 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*. He can be reached at [jnapier@deadlydiversions.com](mailto:jnapier@deadlydiversions.com)

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