

He's Baaack!

Howard Engel's latest a winner

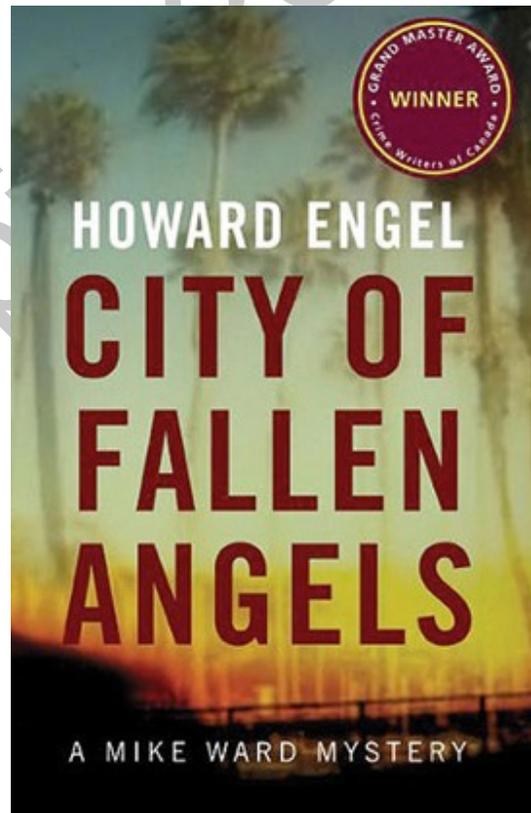
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

In crime-writing circles Howard Engel is a Canadian institution. He is – not arguably, but *is* – the finest writer of Canadian hard-boiled crime fiction of all time. His 1980 debut novel *The Suicide Murders* introduced readers to Benny Cooperman, an engaging Jewish PI who, at best, is but one short step ahead of his adversaries, but who always seems, miraculously, to prevail. The opening paragraph alone is one of the half dozen best hooks in the genre. A dozen Cooperman novels later Engel was named a Grand Master by the Crime Writers of Canada and made a member of the Order of Canada. Fighting the effects of a stroke suffered in 2000 Engel has since published five books, most recently *City of Fallen Angels*, a fine, atmospheric murder tale set in Hollywood during the Golden era of moviemaking.

1940: newspaperman Mike Ward has just returned to Toronto from posts in London, Moscow, Berlin, and Paris, to learn that he's been assigned to a desk job in Los Angeles. Convinced that the world will be drawn into yet another global war, the man who interviewed Mussolini and Stalin is less than thrilled with the prospect of covering the coming war from a Hollywood perspective.

For most Americans the war was something “over there” – something for the Europeans to sort out for themselves. But already the studied neutrality of Roosevelt's America was



showing signs of coming apart, and Ward is convinced that sooner or later America will be drawn into the fray. Taking the Twentieth Century Limited to Los Angeles, he rents a room and settles in for what he anticipates will be a boring posting.

It's not long before Ward's worst fears are confirmed. The Pulitzer-prize winning journalist has been assigned to cover a social event on a yacht, giving readers a sense of what life among the glitterati is like. Among the movers and shakers will be Asa Zavitz, the charismatic (and sometimes headstrong) head of the largest film studio in town.

Hollywood is shocked to learn that Mark Norman, husband of Barbara Lorrison, a leading American actress, has died, apparently by his own hand. Assigned to cover the story, Ward makes a few inquiries around town. But before long he gets a call from a detective Lieutenant named Randal Swarbrick, who warms him off: Hollywood is a company town, and Zavitz has friends in the force. This is a case where no publicity is good publicity. Ward's editor concurs.

Of course no journalist worth his salt will let matters end there. Ward does some digging on his own. The problem is that you turn over enough rocks a few undesirable life-forms are likely to come scurrying out. It's not long before Mike Ward moves from becoming merely a thorn in people's side to a person who needs to be dealt with, and the journalist will need all of his wits if he's to be around to file that story he's after.

Engel hasn't lost his trademark wit, nor his canny ability to sketch a character with a few short lines. Referencing Tinseltown luminaries of the era, Engel serves up a delicious portrait of John Barrymore, with nods along the way to Errol Flynn, Scott Fitzgerald, George Raft, W. C. Fields, and Gary Cooper, weaving them seamlessly into his narrative and enhancing the atmosphere of his engaging tale. *City of Fallen Angels* is a captivating, fun read.

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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 site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com