

Laugh? I thought I'd die

Putting mirth into murder

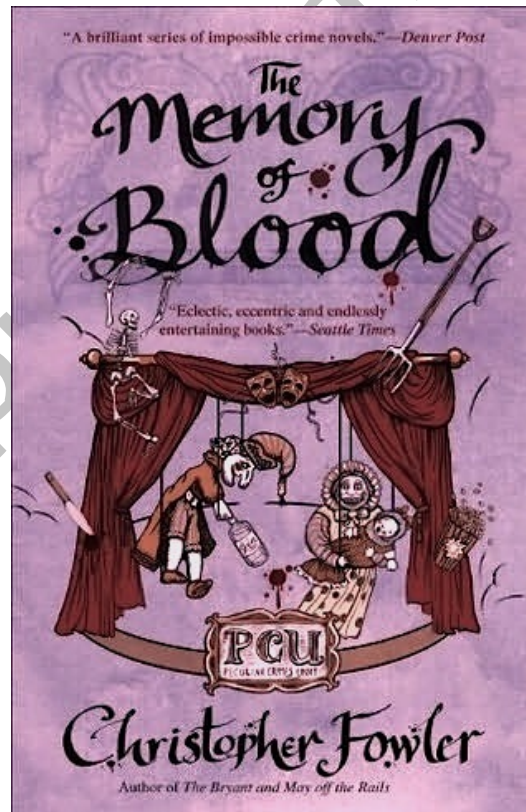
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

BRITISH WRITER Christopher Fowler has shown himself to be a versatile and prolific wordsmith: beginning in the mid-nineteen eighties he has thus far produced a baker's dozen of stand-alone novels, four dozen short stories, a memoir, and been anthologized in a further twenty-one works. Fowler describes his books as about urban unease, dark comedy, mystery and horror, and he might well have added fantasy, having won or been nominated for six awards in that category. But from a crime reader's perspective the most interesting things he's done are his Bryant and May tales, a unique and engaging comic crime series that he began back in 2003.

Fowler's novels feature the exploits of a pair of constantly bickering septuagenarian sleuths; Arthur Bryant and John May (their names are taken from an English company that manufactures matches), are members of the Peculiar Crimes Unit, which is attached to Britain's Home Office. The PCU is a fictional body (though Fowler insists it is based on an actual unit created during the Second World War), and is presided over by a cat named Crippen and housed over a tea shop named – what else? – The Ladykillers. It's the PCU's job to solve crimes that the Met's CID Branch can't (or more likely, doesn't

want to) tackle, and the obdurate odd-couple are perfectly suited to their task.



IN *THE MEMORY OF BLOOD* readers are treated to not one plot, but two. Theatrical producer Robert Kramer and his wife are hosting a backer's party when events go terribly wrong: they discover their infant son Noah has fallen from his bedroom window, six stories to his death. The room was locked from inside, there is no sign of forced entry, and a large Mr. Punch puppet (of *Punch & Judy* fame) is

found on the floor. In a bizarre twist the autopsy reveals marks on the infant's throat that match the puppet's wooden fingers, along with an incriminating splinter from the puppet's hand! It is not long before we learn that the producer manipulated and bullied those around him, and was having financial difficulties as well. When more deaths occur among the production team, each connected to the Punch and Judy tradition, it is clear that someone is out to torment Kramer and doesn't mind playing cat-and-mouse with the Peculiar Crimes Unit in the process.

At the same time, Arthur Bryant has engaged editorial assistant Anna Marquand to help him prepare his memoirs for publication. His past career having involved matters of national security, the publication of Bryant's notes is likely to cause embarrassment in official circles. When Anna is killed and the disk containing his notes goes missing, Bryant resolves to find her killer.

HUMOUR AND HOMICIDE are not an obvious fit, and only a few genre-bending crime writers have managed to successfully combine them – John

Mortimer, Mike Ripley, and Robert Barnard coming to mind. But nine books into his Bryant & May series (and with his tenth, *The Invisible Code*, slated to appear later this year), Christopher Fowler unquestionably belongs in their company. Describing himself as “an urban democrat who believes in change and optimism and embracing difference, and has no interest in the Little-Middle-England mentality,” Fowler insists that it “doesn't stop [him] from loving London and writing about the English with pride.”

FOWLER'S TALES WILL RESONATE with readers in search of character-driven puzzles in the traditional style, but with an added (and large) dollop of dark humour. Firmly tongue in cheek, the author often raises serious social issues, and although his protagonists constantly skirt the edges of legality, it is always in the name of justice. *The Memory of Blood* is firmly in the Fowler Canon, revealing a mordant wit, a captivating puzzle, and a cast of delightfully eccentric oddballs that will keep readers in stitches.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crimestime*, and *January* magazine, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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