

Starting Over

Going home not easy for ex-cons

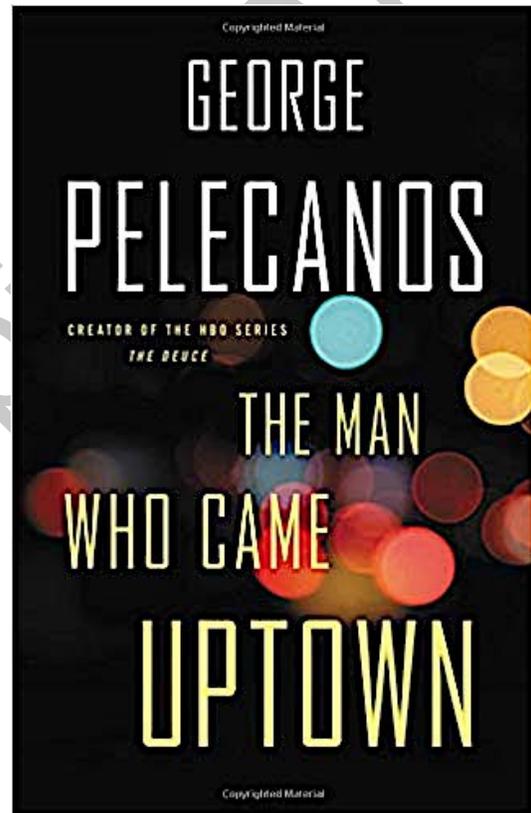
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Through nearly two dozen novels covering four series and six standalones, George Pelecanos has been entertaining and enlightening readers with finely-drawn tales of life set mostly in Washington, DC and its environs. But these are not, as we might expect, tales of the rich and powerful and politically-connected; they dwell mostly on the poor and marginalised, invisible to most Washingtonians even when they are standing before them.

The day began with a badly-planned robbery, and ended with four miscreants arrested and in hospital or in jail. Still awaiting trial nearly two years later, the lawyer for one of them has hired a private investigator, Phil Ornazian, to scope out anything that would aid his boss in constructing a defense against what, on the face if it, would be a done deal when it gets to court. Crucially, the PI uses the inmate to get a message to another inmate, Michael Hudson, who's awaiting trial on a felony gun charge and facing five years in a federal prison; the message is

that everything will be ok, and Ornazian is as good as his word.



As it happens, Michael's stretch in prison is proving to be something of an epiphany. A thoughtful young man, with the aid of a volunteer prison librarian Michael has come to appreciate the joy of reading. This only increases as he comes to appreciate the librarian herself, known to the inmates as

Miss Anna. Later he will be released, and his friendship with Miss Anna will develop in ways he could not have foreseen.

Phil Orzanian began his career as a champion of the poor and wrongly accused; but somewhere along the way the lines have become blurred, and his causes more self-serving. Michael Hudson is at his core a decent person, but following his release he is increasingly drawn into the web of Orzanian's life, and the stage is set for a Faustian conflict between good and evil worthy of Goethe. Little by little, Orzanian calls in his favours from Michael, who is increasingly drawn into the very world he seeks to escape. It seems it can only end badly for all

concerned, but one thing about history: it's unpredictable.

Pelecanos has delivered once again a penetrating, convincing, and ultimately uplifting look at damaged people living on the edge of society. *The Man Who Came Uptown* is as good as anything Pelecanos has written, and that's very high praise indeed. Those readers (and that means most of us) who live comfortable, middle-class suburban lives, and who watch the news channels chronicling the tragedies of urban conflicts and are unable to comprehend what seems to be senseless violence will come away from Pelecanos' latest book with a deeper understanding of how very thin the distinction can be between villain and victim. It is a finely-etched, outstanding read.

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§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning review site, Deadly Diversions. His debut crime novel *Legacy* was published in the Spring of 2017, and the second in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled for release in 2019.

