

England's Loss:

World-class author at home in Canada

by Jim Napier

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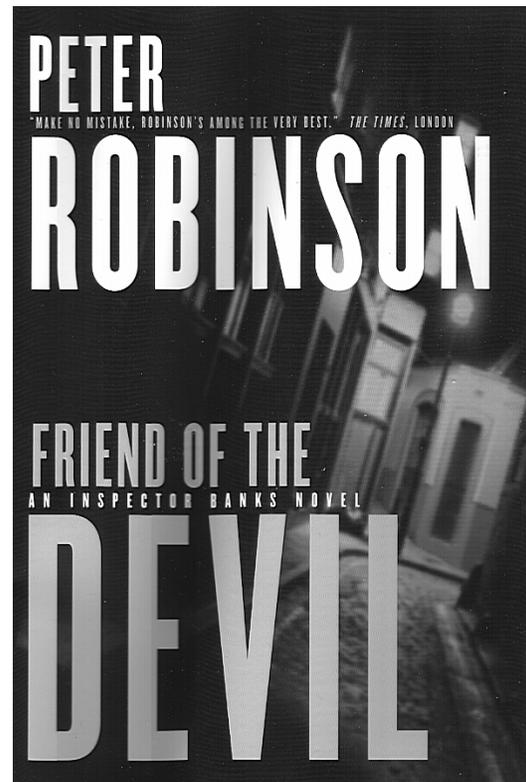
Many Townshippers can trace their ancestry to the British Isles; many others share an abiding interest in and affection for things British. This week's pick will resonate with both groups, as well as with readers who simply appreciate a cracking good mystery with believable and engaging characters and a well-turned plot constructed around complex moral themes. The author immigrated to Canada from England three decades ago. Without a doubt, England's loss was our gain.

Peter Robinson

Born in Yorkshire in 1950, Peter Robinson did his undergraduate studies at the University of Leeds in Northern England. In the early 1970's he came to Canada, where he earned a Master's degree in English Literature at the University of Windsor under tutor Joyce Carol Oates, before completing his Doctorate at York University.

From the beginning Robinson's novels have attracted critical and popular acclaim. Since the publication of his first novel, *Gallows View*, in 1987, Robinson's books have won almost every award going. He has been short-listed for the John Creasey Award in the UK and Best First Novel by the Crime Writers of Canada, subsequently winning the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel in 1992. A later novel was nominated for an Edgar Award by the Mystery Writers of America, and in

1996 Robinson won a second Arthur for Best Novel with *Innocent Graves*, which was also nominated for a Hammett Award by the International Association of Crime Writers. In 2001, the tenth Inspector Banks novel, *In a Dry Season*, won both the Anthony and Barry awards for best novel, as well as France's *Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere* and Sweden's Martin Beck Award. Nor is Robinson's appeal limited to English-speaking audiences: at last count there were seventeen novels in the canon, and his books have been published in fifteen languages.



Although he did not set out to become a crime writer, Robinson says that the

transition was a natural one, the formal structure of the mystery story being closely akin to the poetry he had studied at university. He argues that crime fiction provides the means by which an author can both tell a good tale and also make a statement about society and human behaviour.

The decision to set his stories in Yorkshire, instead of his adoptive land, was also an easy one. Robinson notes that one's formative years often exert the strongest influence on a person: one's school and schoolyard experiences, first dates and girlfriends, music — all work together to shape strong memories; and Robinson acknowledges that his very distance from his native land gives him a certain detachment that comes in useful. The flip side of that, of course, is that Robinson has to be careful to keep his language faithful to his British settings. After so many years in Canada it's easy, for example, to slip and refer to 'pants' instead of 'trousers', and Robinson's many British readers are not shy about correcting him.

A Past President of the Crime Writers of Canada, Peter Robinson lives in the Beaches area of Toronto with his wife, Sheila Halladay. He occasionally teaches crime writing at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies.

Friend of the Devil
McClelland & Stewart, 2007

Alan Banks is in his early fifties, divorced with a grown son and daughter, and an abiding interest in music, especially jazz. He is also a Detective Chief Inspector in Eastvale, in the Yorkshire Dales. Always varied, his job has suddenly grown more challenging with the discovery on a deserted beach of a body in a wheelchair. The victim, a middle-aged woman, has had her throat

slashed. Before he can even set his enquiry in motion another body is found: a college student has been raped and strangled, her body found in the Maze, a local warren of alleyways located in the heart of Eastvale. Embarrassingly, it is just across the street from the Eastvale police headquarters.

Banks' superior, Detective Superintendent Catherine Gervaise, is understandably anxious that the murders be solved quickly. Banks' team includes Detective Sergeant Kevin Templeton, a dislikeable young man who cuts corners and rides roughshod over people's feelings in his effort to get to the top, and Detective Constable Winsome Jackman, a tall black woman from Jamaica who is more-than-usually prim and prides herself on going by the book. Rounding out the investigative unit is Detective Inspector Annie Cabbott, with whom Banks has something of a personal history; he is wary of complicating his life, either personally or professionally, by resuming any intimacy with her. She, on the other hand, struggles to contain her passion for both the bottle and for Banks.

The case takes on a new dimension when it is learned that the apparently innocuous lady in the wheelchair has a murderous past, with no shortage of people who are glad she is dead. Banks must work past the fog of time, ignoring their vengeful feelings, to determine whether one of the people in her past might have nurtured their hatred for years, and emerged from her past to kill her.

If suspects for the first murder are plentiful, those for the second death are thin on the ground. The street was deserted, the victim an innocuous schoolgirl, and her apparently spur-of-

the-moment decision to enter the alleyway. The facts, then, argue against a premeditated crime. Before Banks can solve the puzzle there will be another death in the brick-and-mortar labyrinth that is the Maze.

Recommendation

An ambitious novel, *Friend of the Devil* is a carefully-crafted and engrossing tale about suffering, retribution and justice. Robinson also examines the complex relation between memory, repression and recovery. Not least, the story is about remorse and healing, obsession and forgiveness. At the hand of a lesser writer it would be easy with such heavy themes to become preachy, or to lose one's way. But under Robinson's steady guidance the story unfolds naturally, clearly, and with sureness of purpose.

The writing is compelling, with a strongly evocative sense of place:

“The River Swain...began as a mere puddle bubbling forth from the earth, overflowing into a thin trickle and then gaining strength as it went... The sound of Winsome's car door closing shattered the silence and sent three fat crows soaring up into the sky from a gnarled tree. They wheeled against the grey clouds like black umbrellas blowing inside out...”

Firmly rooted in its setting, *Friend of the Devil* will not only resonate with Canadian readers who have personal ties to Britain in their past, but will also appeal to readers who want to explore the dark complexities of the human mind. A book to be enjoyed on many levels, I recommend it highly.

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