

Montreal Mayhem

Shrier's latest a can't-miss

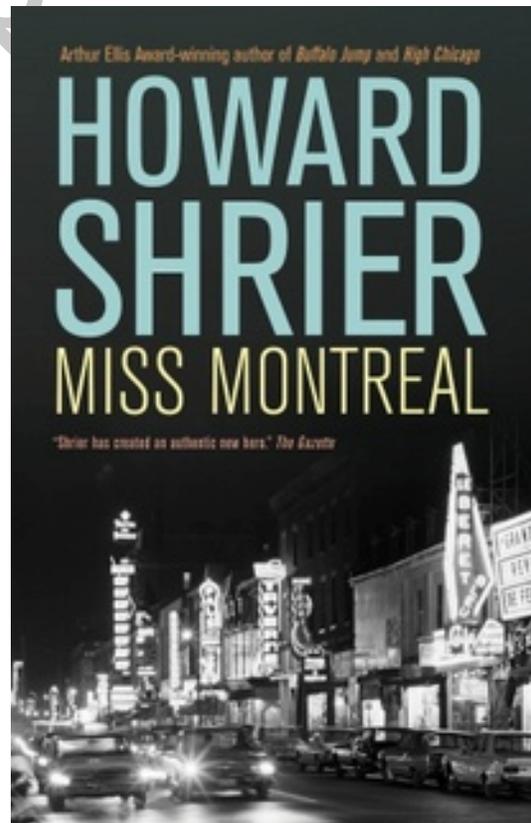
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

With three cracking good novels under his belt, Howard Shrier has just delivered a fourth that will not disappoint his many fans. His debut novel, *Buffalo Jump*, garnered an Arthur Ellis in 2008, and a year later he repeated that achievement with *Jump's* sequel, *High Chicago*. Born and reared in Montreal, Shrier began his career as a crime reporter for the *Montreal Star* in 1979. Maturing as one of crime fiction's recent shining stars, his latest effort, *Miss Montreal*, takes him back to his birthplace for a story that will resonate with anyone who knows the story, and will earn Shrier many new readers.

Sammy Adler was not a natural athlete. As a twelve-year-old at summer camp he was the bane of every baseball coach, his peers scrambling to fill the lineup with the other boys. But another camp kid, Jonah Geller, took Sammy under his wing, instructing him in the proper batting stance, how to read a pitcher, the proper swing. Sammy tried to take it all in and adjust his game, but there's a limit to what one person can teach another. Sammy's seminal moment came when he hit a line drive into the first baseman's glove for the game-ending out.

By all rights Sammy should have been consigned to the Hall of Shame, the subject of cruel jokes that would follow him for the rest of his life. But somehow all of that didn't matter when, decades later, Jonah Geller – now a private detective working out of Toronto – received a call from Sammy's grandfather, Arthur Moscoe, telling him that Sammy has been killed, bludgeoned to death, a Star of David carved into his chest.



So opens *Miss Montreal*, a real corker of a tale.

Although they'd drifted out of touch over the years, Jonah Geller had been Sammy's closest childhood friend. The eighty-three-year-old Moscoe, dying of cancer and unconvinced that Montreal's finest will bring Sammy's killers to book, hires Jonah to solve his grandson's murder. Jonah can't turn for help to his usual partner, Jenn Raudsepp, who remains in Toronto recovering from bullet wounds suffered during their previous case, so he calls in Dante Ryan, a reformed hitman who travels from Boston to give him a hand. Volatile at the best of times, Ryan is especially unreliable as he struggles to cope with his wife having recently left him, taking their son with her; but he shows up, bringing a small arsenal of weapons and an attitude to match.

The police probe into Sammy's death is not helped by the fact that one of the detectives on the case is a staunch Francophone who refuses to cooperate with Jonah – nor by the fact that as a journalist, Sammy had made his share of enemies. Recently he'd been working on two stories. The first concerned how Afghan immigrants were adapting to life in Quebec. Jonah questions a young Afghan woman Sammy had interviewed, but she's evasive. Jonah and Dante leave having learned little. When they meet her again, this time away from her father's shop, they find they're being tailed by a couple of Syrian thugs.

Sammy was also pursuing a story about an influential right-wing nation-

alist politician named Laurent Lortie, who seeks to keep Quebec for the Quebecois – the French-speaking people who comprise the historical core of the province, and who feel that their language and culture are being eroded by the wave of new immigrants. Dating from the original conflict between the two founding peoples, the French and the English, recently the tension has been ramping up, with threats, beatings, and firebombings.

Might Jonah's two story leads have figured in his death? Jonah and Dante must weave their way through the troubled waters of multiethnic Montreal, aided only by a detective who hates Anglos, to thwart a plot with explosive consequences.

With its evocative backstory about two adolescent boys struggling to fit in with summer camp life, *Miss Montreal* had me hooked from the get-go. Shrier deftly sets up the reader for the poignant news of Sammy's death, and uses that hook to lead us effortlessly into an atmospheric tale that captures glimpses of Jewish Montreal in the 1950s and carries us forward to the changing face of the city today. As James Lee Burke does with his protagonists, Dave Robicheaux and Cletus Purcell, Shrier offers up a good cop/bad cop team in Jonah Geller and Dante Ryan. Combining strong characters with a topical plot full of twists and virtually nonstop action, *Miss Montreal* is the strongest entry in an already-very-strong series, and leaves this reader looking forward to Jonah Geller's next outing.

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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*, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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