

An Ordinary Man

Novelist probes a troubled life

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

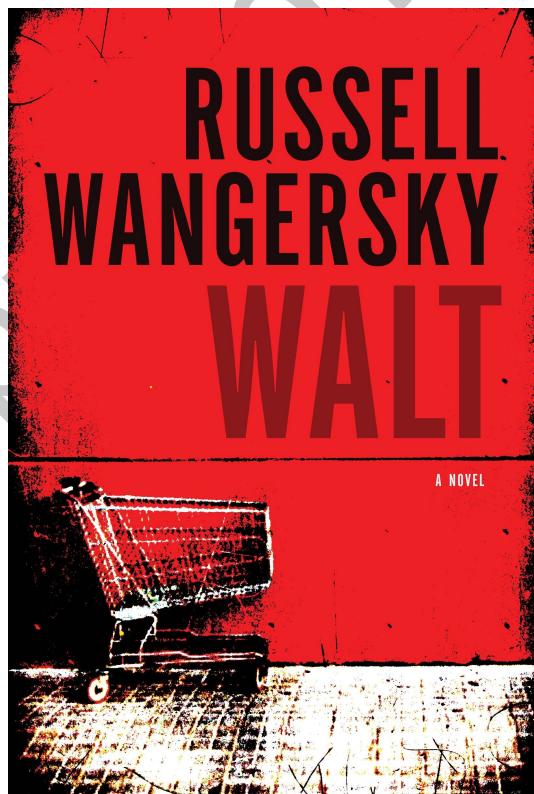
This month, an eerie tale out of Newfoundland guaranteed to give you a cold chill down your back, even while you're admiring the author's skill. But no zombies nor aliens are here, just a haunting chronicle of a solitary man, and what he has become.

Walt is a fifty-year old cleaner at a local grocery store. He's also a collector. Not the sort of person, you understand, who attends auctions and bids for valuable objets d'art, or even the type who frequents secondhand shops in search of that one missing piece of inexpensive esoterica to fill a niche in a hoard of treasured curiosities.

Walt collects other people's grocery lists.

Harmless? Just as surely as though they were pieces in an elaborate picture-puzzle, Walt uses the discarded scraps he retrieves from waste bins and abandoned shopping carts and from the parking-lot of the grocery store where he works to build a picture of people's private lives, gaining insights from the purchases they make, some opting for fashionable foods and party supplies,

others going from day to day and merely making do.



Significantly, all are women. They have names, of course: names like Alisha and Joy and Lori and Jackie. Walt is intrigued to learn whether his subjects are single or in a relationship, happy or troubled, boring or enticing. And as his knowledge grows, so too does Walt's obsession with entering their worlds more directly. Before long he learns where

they live, sometimes following them home, or monitoring their Facebook pages, learning when they'll be away.

Walt had been married to his wife Mary for nearly eighteen years. But gradually their relationship had deteriorated, and finally Mary walked out on him without a word to anyone. Once her disappearance was noticed – Walt had never reported it – the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary investigated, but now more than a year has passed and they're still running on fumes. However, the lead detective, Inspector Dean Hill, has made the case his own personal obsession: he's convinced that Walt was responsible for his wife's disappearance, that he's murdered her. He keeps pressing, even now dropping in on Walt at six in the morning with yet another warrant to

search his home. Walt comes to enjoy the cat-and-mouse game, to revel in the fact that even though the police have turned the place upside down on numerous occasions, ultimately they leave empty-handed. But when, on one of his fishing trips, Walt runs across an isolated cabin with human remains, the game changes.

Walt is a nuanced exploration of the subtle shift from being normal to being different, to being dangerous. Wangersky deftly chronicles a basically ordinary person who lurks on the fringes of other people's lives, and explores the dark corners of obsession, and the unexpected twists in life that no one can predict. A fine psychological thriller with a harrowing ending from the pen of an award-winning and Giller-shortlisted writer.

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