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Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes, Volume 39,  
Number 3, Fall 2005, pp. 85-104 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jcs.2006.0030>



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## “Home Sweet Havoc”: Howard Engel’s Niagara in Print and Film

Marilyn Rose and Jeannette Sloniowski

In “placing” his homespun detective Benny Cooperman in “Grantham,” Ontario, Howard Engel creates a Niagara that is far more than a tourist destination informed by the spectacular natural phenomenon that is Niagara Falls. Rather, Engel’s Niagara is a cultural nexus in which power and power relations, especially as they relate to the politics of exclusion, are explored with a mordant eye and a critical awareness of the consequences when small cities and fertile agricultural regions are left to the political devices of unrestrained hegemonic interests. After exploring Engel’s fiction in light of contemporary theories of place, space and post-coloniality, this essay examines a made-for-television film adaptation of *The Suicide Murders* and asks whether the film retains the complexities and moral vision of the novelistic original.

En « situant » son détective imaginaire Benny Cooperman à « Grantham » (Ontario), Howard Engel crée un Niagara qui est beaucoup plus qu’une simple destination touristique agrémentée par un phénomène naturel spectaculaire—les chutes Niagara. Le Niagara de M. Engel est plutôt un nexus culturel dans le cadre duquel le pouvoir et les relations de puissance, spécialement concernant les politiques d’exclusion, sont examinés avec un œil perçant et une reconnaissance critique des répercussions qui surviennent lorsque de petites villes et des régions agricoles fertiles tombent dans les mains politiques d’intérêts hégémoniques sans restrictions. Après avoir étudié les ouvrages de fiction de M. Engel, en tenant compte des théories contemporaines de lieu, d’espace et de postcolonialité, le présent article examine une adaptation cinématographique créée pour la télévision du livre *The Suicide Murders* et essaie de voir si le film préserve les complexités et la vision morale du roman original.

The Niagara Peninsula has long enjoyed great visibility as a tourist destination. From the earliest days of settlement, visitors have made their way to Niagara to experience the sublimity of the cataract at Niagara Falls, a cross-border phenomenon of transcendent beauty and power. In more recent times, the draw of the falls themselves has been enhanced by a range of other pleasures now available within the region, from the garish new Las Vegas-style casino through an ever-expanding cultural repertoire that includes the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, countless regional wineries, fine restaurants,

and upscale retail sites; together, these comprise a burgeoning level of commercial enterprise that threatens to overwhelm a landscape once renowned for its tender-fruit agriculture.

Given its iconic status and familiarity to tourists, then, it is not surprising that Niagara has at times been used as a setting for fiction of various kinds, from Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* (1997) and Elizabeth McCracken's *Niagara Falls All Over Again* (2001), to the newly released *The Falls: A Novel*, by Joyce Carol Oates (2004). Niagara has also been used from time to time as a setting for detective stories, which again is unsurprising given the fact that detective fiction is on the whole remarkably place-specific. James Lee Burke's New Orleans, L.R. Wright's Sechelt, British Columbia, Janet Evanovich's Trenton, New Jersey, Peter Robinson's Yorkshire, and Ian Rankin's Edinburgh come to mind; it is a well-known fact that consumers of the detective genre frequently "shop by location," seeking crime, mystery, or detective fiction that features the places they know or intend to visit.<sup>1</sup>

Few writers of popular detective narratives, though, have seriously engaged with the Niagara region as a social or historical nexus that amounts to more than a physical setting dominated by the beauty and power of the falls themselves. Kerry Schooley (writing as "John Swan") sets his eponymous John Swan stories in Hamilton, Ontario, and private investigator Swan makes a number of forays into the Niagara Peninsula (*The Rouge Murders*, 1996); however, Niagara as place and space is a mere footnote, a sidebar in effect, given the "steeltown noir" ambience that is Schooley's real focus. Verna Frampton Reid has written three novels focussing directly on Niagara Falls: *Murder Has No Tongue* (2003), *Murder Shrieks Out* (2003), and *Murder on the Lane* (2004). In her books, however, Niagara is little more than the cataract itself, a picturesque, even hackneyed, backdrop for very conventional crime stories. Mel Bradshaw's *Death in the Age of Steam* (2004) is an exciting and melodramatic historical mystery set for the most part in Victorian Toronto. Bradshaw uses Niagara as the setting for a suicide from the lower bridge over the Niagara River, but the larger plot consists of a wide-ranging mystery that takes readers all over Ontario and includes lengthy passages set in Montreal. In this book, too, Niagara is used routinely and iconographically, with an emphasis on the frightening power of the Niagara River and its temptations to the suicidal. One could go on. Douglas Marshall's *A Very Palpable Hit* (1992) is set in Niagara-on-the-Lake and James J. Roberts's *The Hiding Place* (1984) in Niagara, but neither focusses on the Niagara region as a setting of substance, a social and cultural entity worth investigating, let alone interrogating.<sup>2</sup>

Lauren Belfer does better. Focussing on the American side of the falls, her *City of Light* (1999) is an historical mystery set in Buffalo, New York, that stands as a serious examination of class, race, and gender in this burgeoning, newly wealthy industrial city at the turn of the century. In Belfer's novel, the falls represent power in a number of intersecting dimensions. Electric power, the product of the falls' raw energy, comes to realization in Niagara within a web of political intrigue that connects the humblest of labourers to the most elevated of political visionaries in the United States, up to and including President McKinley himself. Belfer's narrative at one point taps into the frightening, almost mythic, power of the falls as the site for the tragic death of a child, but her focus is on the city of Buffalo and on the Niagara Frontier as a whole, as a cultural entity, rather than on the falls as sublime or scenic backdrop.

Belfer's only counterpart on the Canadian side—as a crime novelist who is interested in the Niagara region as a living entity, a place where individuals work and interact for the most part quite independently of the looming majesty of Niagara Falls—is Howard Engel, whose Benny Cooperman series is most known for its humourous and parodic “soft-boiled” elements. Set largely in “Grantham,” a stand-in for Engel's own city of origin, St. Catharines, Ontario, the series features a bumbling detective who makes his sparse living in a town located some 20 kilometres from the falls. In Grantham, the salient social feature is less the hucksterish boosterism that dominates tourist sections of Niagara Falls than the underlying truth that such gaudy tourism masks: the fact that Niagara, as a cultural region, is first and foremost the cultural descendent of British-dominated Upper Canada. It is an Anglo enclave in which issues of race and class foment under a polite veneer that is rigorously maintained by a cultural elite determined to conceal its own hegemonic power.

Although detective fiction is in fact a highly theorized genre, little has been written about what might be thought of as a Canadian School. Other than David Skene-Melvin's historical account of the growth of the genre in Canada, only Beryl Langer's *“Coca-Colonials Write Back: Localising the Global in Canadian Crime Fiction”* (1997) stands out as a serious engagement with what she defines as a post-colonial Canadian style or sub-set within this very popular global genre.<sup>3</sup> Langer argues that Canadian crime writers can be read as post-colonial and counter-hegemonic, in effect as “writing back” to powerful American (and British) versions of the genre (1997, 481). For Langer, such writing represents “an attempt on the part of the authors to imagine the nation as sufficiently ‘different’ from its powerful neighbour to warrant maintaining a separate polity” (477). Indeed, the act of *reading* narratives that write back to an imperial centre, as Langer hypothesizes in this case, may also stand as a form

of strategic anti-hegemonic practice. Michel de Certeau argues with respect to popular literature, and indeed all everyday practices, that “The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, lends a political dimension to [such] everyday practices” (1988, xvii).

Langer identifies a number of “textual strategies” (1997, 481) that might be considered localizing and/or ironic postcolonial inflections of the mainstream American genre. Key among these is the employment of certain well-known “tropes of politeness and mild-mannered decency” (481) in respect to the Canadian hero or heroine, along with an almost obsessive practice of naming “cities, streets, suburbs, and highways—offering the gift of familiar placement to readers whose generic imaginary has been shaped by reading about *there* rather than *here*” (482). Certainly the penchant of Canadian crime writers for the inclusion not only of frequent and specific place names but even of Canadian consumer products would support Langer’s sense of Canadian detective fiction’s having deployed differentiating textual strategies as a territorial gesture. Unlike novelists like Scotland’s Ian Rankin, who can make good use of local dialects to “write back,” many Canadian authors have no such marked differences in speech. For writers like Lou Allin, for example, author of *Northern Winters Are Murder* (2000), *Blackflies Are Murder* (2002), and *Bush Poodles Are Murder* (2003), which are all set in Sudbury, “speaking Canadian” would appear to consist of copious referencing of real Canadian consumer goods like Kraft Dinner, President’s Choice Frozen Green Beans, and regular visits to “Timmies” for coffee and doughnuts.

The detective fiction of Howard Engel is indeed characterized by a wry and amusing “coca-colonialising” of the American version of the detective genre along the lines that Langer sets out. In his Benny Cooperman series, Engel has created an appealing and geo-specific series character, a “Canadian-Niagaran” much beloved by the general Canadian reader, and much of Engel’s reputation rests upon response to this element in his work. Margaret Cannon, for example, longtime crime novel reviewer for *The Globe and Mail*, has called Engel the “Grand Old Man of Canadian Crime fiction,”<sup>4</sup> in recognition of the 11 Benny Cooperman mysteries featuring his peculiarly Canadian detective, a gentle Jewish gumshoe who dubs himself “a transom peeper” and distinguishes himself from his hard-boiled American counterparts by cheerfully taking on the lowly assignments, most notably the routine and ignominious divorce work that truly hard-nosed investigators like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe tend to eschew as being beneath their hard-boiled dignity. Benny lives from hand to mouth. If trouble walks into his shabby walk-up office on Grantham’s main

street, it is cause for fiscal jubilation, no matter how apparently mundane or unpromising the assignment.

Benny's modest demeanour is both appealing and, by Langer's definition, a strategic configuration in postcolonial generic terms. He lives in a rundown hotel and seldom attends the local synagogue, but he does manage to visit his parents on Friday nights (where he must endure both his mother's dreadful cooking and his father's perpetual comparisons between Benny and his more successful brother). His mildness is typified by his habit of dining on chopped-egg sandwiches on white, with milk, at the local lunch counter. As an enjoyably soft-boiled Canadian detective figure, Benny Cooperman spends a great deal of time avoiding the violent episodes that stereotypical detectives appear to enjoy as indices of manliness, although he is no less given to the wisecracking propensities of his hard-boiled American counterparts, in their use of colour and humour as a means of distancing readers from the horrors of the crimes under investigation.<sup>5</sup>

It is also true that Benny's Grantham is pleurably "local" and anti-hegemonic in Langer's terms in the way that the Cooperman narratives celebrate Canadian geography and Canadian place names. Under the name of "Grantham," one of the wards that makes up the present-day city of St. Catharines, Engel reproduces the geography of this small city, where he was born in 1931. The parallels are extensive. Beginning with the first novel in the series, *The Suicide Murders* (1980), Benny is seen to inhabit a Grantham where "St. Andrew Street" stands in for St. Paul Street in St. Catharines, where "Montecello Park" (counterpart to Montebello Park) sits on Ontario Street close to "Hotel Dieu Hospital," the name of a St. Catharines hospital that, like Grantham's Hotel Dieu, features a Physicians' Building just across the street (1980, 9). The city market in both cases is close to "James Street," and the MacLeish Sporting Goods store in Grantham, very much like Patrick's in St. Catharines, is to be found on the main commercial drag (20). In Grantham as in St. Catharines, there is a Capitol Theatre on St. Andrew (15) and a "Queenston Street" that leads to "Victoria Lawn Cemetery" (16).

The correspondences are political and cultural as well as geographic. The old canal system is a constant presence in both cities, as is "Eleven Mile Creek" (a pseudonym for St. Catharines' "Twelve Mile Creek"), but the escarpment itself has become little more than "a spine" (1980, 28) that runs along a highway, the "QEW," that leads to Toronto. Homes along "Hillcrest Avenue" in both cities back onto the creek (16), at the head of which can be found a "High Level Bridge" and the old Canal Builder's Mansion overlooking it, with streets named after "dead British colonial bigwigs" running north from that juncture (38). Yet

this somewhat pastoral, historic setting is set against the perpetual presence of class distinctions: “South Ridge” (a stand-in for real life “Glenridge”) and Bellevue Terrace (a real-life address in the shadow of which Engel grew up in St. Catharines) house the privileged in Benny Cooperman’s world, while a working-class neighbourhood called “Power Gorge” corresponds to real-life “Power Glen” (20). Fast-food outlets, a sign of American economic incursion and power, line Ontario St. North in both fictional and actual cities (15), while the most polluted part of the Grantham’s landscape is “Papertown,” clearly a metonym for Thorold, which still stands adjacent to but willfully separate from the city of St. Catharines, its more prosperous neighbour (16). Moreover, in larger terms, Grantham (like real-life St. Catharines) is configured by Engel as occupying a median position between the commercial space that is Toronto and the “tenderloin” that is Buffalo (52).

In fact, it is this emphasis on power and power relations within his fictional landscape that strikes us as more important than Engel’s Canadian inflections or the “coca-colonisation” of the genre that Langer hypothesizes.<sup>6</sup> Here we turn to contemporary thought about place and space as cultural entities inseparable from time and from social processes and social relations. For cultural geographer Doreen Massey, for example, space is as fluid as the social relations that inform it, and cities are particularly intense articulations of competing histories and interests. Massey defines the city as a “spatial phenomenon” characterized by an “intensity” deriving from the “density” and “heterogeneity” that mark city life (1999, 159). Urban “interconnections” are always fraught, she says, given the “axes of difference” (ethnic, sexual, class, and cultural) that characterize an urban population (165). Massey suggests that urban life involves a “constant process of negotiation” across such differences (165)—to which we would add our own awareness of the longitudinal nature of such negotiations. Where power is exercised, the powerless may have to concede at a given point in time. In urban detective fiction, however, injustice demands rectification over time, as power differentials shift and the formerly powerless seek redress through the process of detection and such restitution as may be possible at this future point in time.

For Howard Engel, Niagara is just such a cultural nexus, and one within which human connections and cultural relationships are as important as topological phenomena such as Niagara’s cataract. It seems significant to us that only one of the Cooperman series to date, *Murder on Location* (1984), is actually set in Niagara Falls and that in this novel the falls themselves are little more than celluloid artifice, stage scenery, the backdrop for the making of a Hollywood film. The crimes in the novel have nothing to do with the falls as myth or magnet.

Rather they represent a mockery of the ambitions of a small-town writer, originally from Grantham, who is now a Hollywood scriptwriter, and who murders to hide evidence of his own plagiarism and to cover past crimes. For the villain, Neil Furlong, Niagara is a place from which the ambitious seek to escape and Niagara Falls a phenomenon to be harnessed for cinematic consumption.

For Benny Cooperman, the Niagara region is a complex bicultural entity, an absorbing cultural web, a frontier that incorporates an undefended border. It is a locus of paired cities, and Benny is dismayed when his investigations lead him to cross the border into the United States and he encounters the dilapidated state of present-day Niagara Falls, New York. A genuine “border kid,” he remembers this border town as a pleasant and easily accessed place of childhood pleasures.<sup>7</sup> Crossing the river as a child in either direction was an enriching experience, an opportunity to experience difference and hence an antidote to the small-mindedness and xenophobia that so often characterize small-town life: “People who don’t live near a border,” Benny says, “lose a free lesson in just about every subject they teach in school. People who grow up surrounded by more of the same for hundreds of miles on either side of them end up international yokels, gaping at strange licence plates or looking suspiciously at a foreign coin” (1984, 37).

When, close to the end of *Murder on Location*, Benny chases the murderer across the disintegrating ice-bridge that has temporarily yoked the two countries (a winter phenomenon eerily familiar to those who live in the Niagara region), it is a powerfully symbolic episode. The thundering of the nearby falls, the deafening noises of the cracking ice, and Benny’s fear of falling through into the frigid water are reminders of the limitations of celluloid renditions of powerful natural phenomena; but what really matters to Benny Cooperman is the apprehension of a cross-border, border-crossing criminal who has broken the social contract, destabilized local life, and exploited “the falls” in the name of individual and corporate greed.

It is quotidian Niagara, however, in the form of the small city of “Grantham,” that is Engel’s real focus in the Benny Cooperman series, a discursive space in which Michel Foucault’s observation that depicted territory is always “juridico-political” (1972, 68), is always a discursive formation needing to be analyzed “in terms of tactics and strategies of power” (77), would appear to hold true. For Engel, Grantham represents cities like St. Catharines that were formed in the crucible of nineteenth-century British imperial power, with its need for timber, and minerals, and transportation systems (in this case lakes and canals) that could deliver them as needed by king and (mother) country. While the economic glory days were over for Grantham and similar communities by the mid-twentieth century, leaving



decaying monuments from factories to abandoned canals in their wake, the remnants of class-based cultural power persist, however cleverly muted. Engel exposes this power structure in his seemingly benign fictions, as the first book in the series, *The Suicide Murders*, makes evident—and as the made-for-television film of this novel does not.

The novel opens generically, with Benny interviewing the attractive, well-heeled, and apparently dangerous femme fatale Myrna Yates in his seedy walk-up office. Yates (whose name St. Catharines readers immediately connect to Yates Street, historical home of the city's establishment) engages Benny's services because she believes that her well-to-do businessman husband Chester is having an affair. In short order, however, in keeping with the conventions of the genre, the plot thickens: Chester is found dead, and his seemingly inexplicable suicide launches Benny on a voyage through the nasty pasts of Grantham's first families.

On the one hand, the Grantham of *The Suicide Murders* is intimate, a small city-town in which someone from one's grade eight class (like Willy Horner) or one's high school (Constable Peter Staziak) is frequently re-encountered (1980, 10, 22). On the other hand, Grantham is marred by greed and greed. Not only do a number of "suicide murders" occur in bucolic Grantham by the novel's end, as one might expect in a murder mystery, but the cityscape is itself marred by the twin demons of capitalism and racism. Much of Grantham is far from pretty, pockmarked by a faceless, feckless capitalism that Benny despises. Grantham features a factory on its main street, one that backs onto a steep embankment down which Benny, pursued at one point, rolls without ceremony and without glamour, a slope that represents the "backside" of Grantham and is replete with "empty wine bottles, broken glass, damp cardboard and other garbage" (122). Benny frequently points out that the city reeks of capitalism's effluents, since the stink of paper-manufacturing chemicals permeates the air day and night.

Politics, too, are malodorous in Grantham. In this novel the entrepreneurs (Yates, Ward) who dispense with those in their way, and the police officer who is in cahoots with them (Harrow), are all well-heeled "Anglos" while the "good guys" (Jewish detective Cooperman, Middle European cop Staziak, gay podiatrist Bushmill) are all outsiders. While the Anglo movers and shakers live and work in posh quarters, co-ordinate crooked research deals, and fend off blackmail, Benny ekes out his marginal and marginalized living at the "wrong end" of St. Andrew Street. Benny constantly signals his severance from the town's "upper crust"; he comments, rather disingenuously, that what he does not know about them would "fill a library" (1980, 1).<sup>8</sup>

What his investigations reveal, however, is a depth of corruption astonishing in its reach. Murder in the present day proves to be connected to murders in the

past that were committed and concealed by Grantham's Wasp establishment when Yates and Ward were university students at Secord University. The victims of these long-buried crimes—an aspiring middle-class girl and an immigrant boy—were even then little more than detritus to the drug-dealing sons of the town's wealthy class, easily forgotten because marginal in class, ethnicity, and/or gender. Hence it is both significant and satisfying, given the cultural milieu that Engel has established, that the nemesis in the case of Grantham's establishment (since several of the first families' reputations lie in ruins by the end of the novel) proves to be one of those marginalized by hegemonic power, Hilda Blake, a truly Blakean figure of angelic retribution,<sup>9</sup> whose family (old, Protestant, agrarian, not-quite-upper-crust) has existed on the fringes of, and been abused by, the powers-that-be all these years. What could be more satisfying to Benny Cooperman, Jewish gumshoe and cultural outsider that he is, than exposing the very group that has excluded him all his life? Clearly the strength of this novel, and of the rest of the Cooperman series, lies in its contestation of the very sweetness and light that ostensibly mark Benny Cooperman and his life and work in this superficially pretty small town. By the novel's end, the juridico-political milieu of which Foucault speaks has been exposed, and Benny himself has successfully employed "tactics" designed to undermine those longstanding "strategies of power" (Foucault 1972, 77) that have dominated this less-than-edenic little city.

The strength of Engel's cultural critique, achieved as it is through a layered rendition of place and space in the Cooperman novels, is made clearer when one examines the book against the television film adaptation of *The Suicide Murders* (1985), directed by Graham Parker and starring the redoubtable Saul Rubinek as Benny Cooperman.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that Engel himself wrote the screenplay and makes a sly cameo appearance, the film's significant lapses with respect to the treatment of place invite critical scrutiny.

It is true that the adaptation of novels to film is always somewhat problematic. Brian McFarlane in *Novel to Film* (1996) has argued that the "faithfulness fallacy," or the critic's desire to see the most faithful adaptation possible, is one of the most stubborn traditions to be dispelled when discussing such adaptations: "Discussion of adaptation has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue, no doubt ascribable in part to the novel's coming first, and in part to the ingrained sense of literature's greater respectability in traditional critical circles" (1996, 8). In other words, it is fruitless, in McFarlane's view, to castigate a film for not being a novel, since the novel and the film have different "authors" with different senses of what the story is about, and because novel and film will employ different conventions for managing narrative and very likely will have different audiences in mind for the finished product.<sup>11</sup> McFarlane does, however, suggest

that there is some value in considering “the kinds of transmutations that have taken place, to distinguish what the filmmaker has sought to retain from the original and the kinds of use to which he has put it” (23).

In a more recent study, Sarah Cardwell (2002) offers a more “pluralist” approach to the study of adaptation. Arguing, like McFarlane, that comparisons of two texts merely on the basis of what is left out inevitably find the “copy” inferior, she argues that any study of adaptation must consider other intertextual sources such as previous similar film adaptations, ideology, context, and industrial norms. She also argues that a simple comparative study of an adaptation to its most obvious source would “fail to appreciate the subtleties of the screen text, which draws upon a broader frame of reference to establish its mood. The ways in which the film utilizes imagery from sources other than the source book in order to convey specific meanings frequently pass unmarked” (2002, 68). With this in mind, we examine the film version of *The Suicide Murders* in terms of its engagement not only with Cooperman’s novel, but also with conventions of the made-for-television movie and particularly the private-eye genre.

Graham Parker, director of the film version of *The Suicide Murders*, has created a film that is more or less faithful to the novel’s cardinal functions or main plot events. It is at the level of the narrative indices, or enrichments of the cardinal functions, however, that the main differences between novel and film can be found, and in the case of the two versions of *The Suicide Murders*, the use of indices related to place, and the generation of meaning through the use of “locality,” or local detail, are particularly telling.

Parker’s film is heavily dependent upon allusions, some parodic and some direct, to American film conventions and counterparts, just as Engel’s novel clearly owes a debt to the hard-boiled private-eye tradition in fiction and film. In a postcolonial study of Engel’s novels, Patrick Quinn argues that Engel’s construal of Benny Cooperman has been influenced “by tough guy Sam Spade and the cerebral and witty Philip Marlowe,” although Cooperman “remains discernibly different from his American models” (2001, 99). Certainly the novel *The Suicide Murders* owes much of its iconography to the American private-eye film, as in, for example, the depiction of the detective’s cheesy upstairs office, where private-eye films always seem to begin, and of the private eye’s typically threadbare, lonely apartment, complete with blinking neon lights from the bar downstairs. The film version of *The Suicide Murders* appears, however, to be equally influenced, particularly in its Jewish humour, by a second set of American influences, notably the work of Woody Allen, to whom Saul Rubinek’s affable rendition of the Cooperman character owes a great deal. Much of Benny’s “softness” in the film derives from his

portrayal as a nebbish, a duffer of a detective, who routinely plays the fool, as if to cloak his intellect beneath a conveniently inept and awkward exterior. That Benny Cooperman (atypically, amongst others of his genre) regularly throws up when he finds a dead body gestures towards the wimpish Allen genealogy that Saul Rubinek draws upon in playing him.<sup>12</sup> Rubinek's debt to Allen is even more obviously demonstrated in *Murder Sees the Light* (1986), the second of the Engel novels made for television. Here Benny finds himself on a case in Algonquin Park, and Rubinek performs, with considerable relish, the urban private eye's antipathy to woodland nasties that buzz and bite, and to unruly flapping fish, emphasizing to comic effect Benny's inability to inhabit the wilderness.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the film, Benny is delighted to return to "the big smoke"—which is to say metropolitan Grantham.

A further American reference for Parker's film is undoubtedly Lieutenant Columbo, another kind of ethnic outsider and the hero of the American television series *Columbo*, which ran from 1971 to 1993. Columbo, as played by Peter Falk, was a bedraggled police detective whose unpromising exterior covered a brilliant Sherlockian mind. What Parker's Benny Cooperman gestures towards is Columbo's rumpled appearance, his dogged persistence, and his non-violence (for Columbo is one of the few American television cops who does not carry a gun), though Columbo has an intellectual ruthlessness that is absent in the Cooperman character as Parker construes him.<sup>14</sup>

The Engel novels, the made-for-television film, and even *Columbo* are arguably part of a larger parodic trend within the genre. The private-eye, once the knight in shining armour of Chandler's *The Simple Art of Murder*, the man who was "a man of honour—by instinct and by inevitability" (1964, 193), became the butt of occasionally derisive humour in the 1970s and 1980s with films like *The Long Goodbye* (Altman 1973), *Chinatown* (Polanski 1974), *The Cheap Detective* (Moore 1978) and *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Reiner 1982). In *The Long Goodbye*, Elliot Gould, an actor not known for action or tough-guy roles, portrays Philip Marlowe as a loner who shuffles like a somnambulist through a Los Angeles awash in drugs, ditzy bimbos high on Alice B. Toklas brownies, and the array of vicious quacks and drunken novelists typical of the Chandler novels. Unlike Chandler's Marlowe, Altman's gumshoe does not seem to care much about the world in which he lives. This film, like *Chinatown*, seems to indicate a loss of faith in the private eye, a questioning of his worth in a culture engaged in a painful reassessment of its heroes in the wake of the war in Vietnam and the emerging Watergate scandal. Bill Oliver, in "*The Long Goodbye* and *Chinatown*: Debunking the Private Eye Tradition," argues that the private eye character had always had an anachronistic aspect but that, in the

end, in the 1970s American film versions the hard-boiled detective began to look like a clown because of “contemporary filmmakers’ loss of faith in him” (1975, 248).

It is Benny’s status as a klutzy Jewish PI functioning within this kind of cinematic tradition, then, that the film focusses upon. Engel’s Cooperman has a clownish aspect. Both film and novel portray the alienation of a Jewish Other in small-town Grantham. In the Grantham of the novel, the Jewish Cooperman is never able to obtain decent bagels (even in a restaurant ironically called “The Bagel”) and Benny’s bagel-less status is emphasized and iconic given its parallel, the marginalization and dispersal of those who do not belong or who get in the way of Grantham’s establishment. In the film, however, the lack of bagels is played only for laughs, and this is an important distinction: the critical point is lost in the broadness of the film’s humour when Benny comments on the inappropriateness of eating “lox on a muffin.”

Again and again in the film, Benny’s status as an awkward Jewish mensch is humorously emphasized. To signal his comical outsider status, Benny is seen lumbering across King Street in a snowstorm, wearing a huge, awkward parka,<sup>15</sup> and later he clumsily fumbles with his dainty tea cup and fancy “high tea” sandwiches in the home of glamorous Myrna Yates, a bull in the china shop of her elegant, modern living room. She watches him with cool reserve as he stumbles and squirms. The viewer is invited to compare this awkward tea party with another sequence in the film where Benny has coffee with Chester Yates’s former secretary, Martha Tracy. The two flirt and consume instant coffee from mugs, with Benny joking that instant coffee is the only kind he knows. Christian iconography is also used to highlight Benny’s separation from Grantham’s Christian mainstream. In a scene set at the Hotel Dieu Hospital, Benny is caught as a sprawling, untidy heap, asleep at the feet of a pristine statue of the Virgin Mary. At Chester Yates’s funeral, Benny stands somewhat apart from the funeral services, but a large crucifix, dominating the frame, stands just behind him.

Engel’s novel also insists upon Benny’s Jewishness, of course, and does so fairly broadly. The film repeats a joke that is found in the novel, when Benny is asked, “What’s your Christian name,” and he replies, “My first name is Ben. But I’m Jewish” (1980, 167).<sup>16</sup> In the novels, however, Benny’s position is more nuanced, and in *Murder Sees the Light* (1985) Benny articulates a discursive position more complex than that to be found in Parker’s film: “in a small town like Grantham, where I come from, you grow up Calvinist no matter what you hyphen it to. In fact the synagogue is on the corner of Church and Calvin. You can’t get more protestant than that” (48-49).<sup>17</sup> While Benny is undoubtedly

Jewish and an outsider, he is portrayed in the novels as being inescapably integrated into the world around him. He inhabits Grantham's main street and rubs shoulders constantly with the goyim, many of whom are his friends, from Frank Bushmill to Pete Staziak and Willy Horner, and the mainstream has rubbed off on him, as when he consumes bland comestibles at Diana Sweets or "the United." In literature as in life, ethnic positioning is more complex than Parker's film would suggest. Benny Cooperman is a part of even as he is apart from the cultural mainstream in Grantham, Ontario.

In the Cooperman novels, marginalization and otherness are located along intersecting vectors. In terms of gender, the novel insists upon the forlorn life of Frank Bushmill, the alcoholic, intellectual, and gay podiatrist with whom Benny shares a floor in his office building: "Around here, poor Frank was the gay crowd. No wonder he drank" (1980, 15). The quip, placed in the novel in the context of Benny's and Frank's late-night encounters and the latter's tendency to take refuge in the loneliness of semantics, serves to highlight Frank's isolation and desolation in a small provincial city. In the film, the quip is preserved but without resonance, owing to the film's focus on Benny's comic ineptitude and comedic repertoire, as opposed to any genuine replication of the novel's insistence on the darkness attached to outsider status in a city where to be different is to be alone and to all intents and purposes invisible.

Nor does the film convey much of Engel's novelistic critique of the class system in Grantham. In the novel, the city is literally owned and operated by rich Wasps whose youthful crimes comprise the bedrock upon which they have built their fortunes. Their current intention is to urbanize Niagara's agricultural lands, a real-life hot issue for Niagara residents, and one that Engel is careful to align with historic patterns of capitalist consumption in this fertile region. Benny complains throughout this first novel of the level of pollution that contaminates the waterways of Niagara. He reports that the "night air" is "heavy with sulphur" and that "white froth from the paper mills glow[s] on the surface of the water" thanks to "polluters" (1980, 119). Issues of pollution and urban sprawl are taken up in greater detail later, in *Dead and Buried* (1990), but they are certainly present in the novel *The Suicide Murders*, though they are largely ignored in the film. Hence while it is pleasant to observe the film's preservation of certain visually appealing aspects of the real St. Catharines, like the warm and friendly Diana Sweets Restaurant where Engel himself makes his cameo appearance, it is unfortunate that the film does not take Benny's case as seriously as the novel does, and that it prefers to play up his outsider status as a Jew at the expense of seeing the entire web of hegemonic exclusions connected to the matters that Benny investigates.<sup>18</sup>

One of the strongest indicators that it is class rather than ethnic differentiation that drives Engel's agenda is the way that the film, in concentrating on the character of Benny, is insufficiently developed or textured so as to support the ending, the solution to the crime. The novel spends considerable time demonstrating the unacknowledged class system that lies behind Hilda Blake's crimes. The novel insists upon the class difference between the rich lads running a drug laboratory and their original victims, Hilda's sister and her ethnic chemist boyfriend. In the novel Engel emphasizes Hilda's family's "modest" home and their relentless striving for respectability. These are subtle matters in Grantham: to be borderline middle-class, without historic lineage, as Hilda's family is, is to be consigned to the outer fringes of local society in perpetuity. Hilda's sister is bright enough to go to university, but her boyfriends must come from aspiring social groups like her own. When individuals need to be eliminated, second-class citizens like herself will be quickly dealt with and quietly interred.

Hilda herself has no means of effecting retribution for her sister's death other than to use her own wit perversely, to wreak private vengeance on those who have destroyed her family. The film omits images of the Blake home and Benny's encounter with the sad, proper mother who still lives there with her menagerie of caged songbirds (Engel 1980, 160), which symbolize the paralysis that those seeking justice from a tainted establishment must feel in a place like this. In the end, Hilda emerges in the film as merely crazy, an isolated madwoman, as is signalled by the non-diegetic song "I'm Living on the Moon" that plays over the film's last scene. Critic Gillian Mackay argues that in the Parker film the crime's "resolution almost seem to come from nowhere" (1986, 45). The film's suggestion of madness as motivation is convenient, but insubstantial, particularly given the novel's insistence upon a sympathetic portrait of Hilda Blake; her retribution is understandable given the invidious web of class and power in Grantham that makes it impossible for someone like her to obtain justice. In the novel, Hilda aligns herself with noble avengers in the tradition of Brutus or Charlotte Corday (Engel 1980, 172), and Engel concurs in having Benny characterize Hilda in the end as having "made herself totally the weapon of hate," yet "remain[ing] somehow uncorrupted by it" (170).

Parker's film, then, perhaps because it is intended to appeal to a wider audience than the novel, purges the novel of many of its more significant localisms and blunts its critique of the small city elite in Grantham, the effects of their greed on the landscape, and their subtle racism. Played more for laughs than the novel, the film—perhaps because it is made for television—seeks the broader humour and gentler social criticism more typical of a good deal of

mainstream television. As Elaine Rapping argues, made-for-television movies seldom mount systemic critiques, preferring instead to deny “public realities ... in the interest of personal domestic drama” (1992, 41). This is not to say that the film does not score some moral points against the elites that anger Engel, but the television audience is offered a kinder, gentler, less pungent Benny Cooperman. Like several other Canadian films looking for a larger audience across and even outside of Canada, the film tends to downplay the novel’s roots in a particular community strongly marked by local issues. The film’s opening music, “My Town is Your Town,” generalizes the film’s message and derogates its local appeal. In our view, this “loss of Niagara” amounts to a loss of moral fibre and a loss of censure, both of which are present and ripe for critical picking in Engel’s easily underestimated, but ultimately high-minded detective fiction.

In *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981), Dennis Porter argues that in detective fiction “Landscapes appear either as the source and extension of the crimes reported or as their antithesis. The background a writer chooses for his work and his perception of its relationship to the evil events narrated, express a socially evaluating vision” (190). It is particularly easy to underrate detective fiction that appears to belong to the village mystery sub-genre, whether that of the English vicarage (Agatha Christie and her ilk) or contemporary “cosies” set in small-town North America. Yet in small-town detective fictions such as those of Howard Engel, where the social setting is localized in ways that suggest containment, the social critique may in fact be no less hard-hitting than in grittier fictions set in larger, apparently ungovernable cities. Localized fictions like Engel’s insist that crimes in small towns are not aberrations to be rooted out of an otherwise benevolent world. Rather, they arise from a serious corruption of the social system, on a smaller scale, but no less heinous, than iniquity in larger settings. Engel’s *Suicide Murders* pinpoints the destruction of the Niagara landscape by the greedy sons of the wealthy, from the pollution of creeks and canals to the destruction of the fruitlands surrounding the city. Evil writ small is still evil: Grantham, like St. Catharines, is a small town on its way to the big city corruption and mean streets so common in hard-boiled detective novels.



## Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the “Niagara!” conference organized by the Association for Canadian Studies in Niagara Falls, April 2003.

1. A tourist industry has sprung up around the considerable interest of consumers of detective fiction in the real-world accuracy of the places depicted. Detective fiction readers can now sign up for tours of sites mentioned in detective fiction (as in the Rebus tours, wherein tourists can visit places mentioned in Ian Rankin’s Edinburgh-set novels featuring John Rebus). At a recent academic conference in Regina, Saskatchewan, participants were taken on a tour of the University of Regina campus highlighted by the tour guide’s identification of sites specific to Gail Bowen’s series featuring detective Joanne Kilbourn.
2. In terms of other media, a short-lived television series called *Taking the Falls* (Kennedy 1995), set in Niagara Falls and featuring Cynthia Dale cast as private eye Terry Lane, did manage to capture the hucksterish, Coney Island aspect of the Niagara tourist industry. Its focus is limited to the depiction of Niagara Falls as a tourist area; there is no real sense of the complexity of Niagara in a broader sense.
3. For an indication of the popularity of this genre in English, world-wide, readers should consult our website, *Crime Fiction Canada*, a compendium of searchable “webliographies” covering both Canadian detective fiction in English and critical responses in English to detective fiction worldwide, including books, films and television programs (Rose and Sloniowski 2004).
4. Howard Engel is a substantial presence in Canadian broadcasting and publishing. For most of his life, Engel has lived and worked in the world of public broadcasting in Toronto, most notably as a successful executive producer with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. He is the founding chair of the Crime Writers of Canada, and has been nominated for and has won numerous awards for fiction writing, including the Arthur Ellis Best Novel Award for *Murder Sees the Light* in 1985 and the Derrick Murdoch Award in 1988 for contributions to the genre. In 1990, he won the Harbourfront Festival Award for Canadian Literature. In 1994, he received an honorary doctorate from Brock University, and he has served as the Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor in Canadian Culture at the University of Toronto.
5. Readers, of course, have come to expect, and take pleasure from, florid and often outrageous wisecracks from private eyes, which demonstrate what Raymond Chandler once called one of the defining characteristics of the private eye hero, “a rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness” (193). The private eye often makes his best wisecracks at the expense of powerful criminals or the police, making use of his “rude wit” against the superior power of the authorities—authorities who are often corrupt or obstructionist in hardboiled stories—and gangsters who lay vicious beatings on him.

6. Although Langer's analysis of Canadian detective fiction as postcolonial practice is suggestive and valuable for our analysis to a point, we do have concerns about defining all Canadian detective fiction as primarily postcolonial. While our research suggests that Canadian detective fiction authors often play with or write against generic conventions, and sometimes do so in ways that interrogate cultural imperialisms of various kinds, there are also many Canadian writers of crime, mystery, and detection who have other interests and whose work does not stand, even tacitly, as strategically counter-hegemonic in Langer's sense.
7. For many Niagarans, going "over the river" is one of the "practices of everyday life" (de Certeau 1988) on the border, and Niagara Falls, New York, and Buffalo are part of the local landscape. This aspect of border life is quite different from and alien to parts of Canada far from the border with the United States.
8. The same discomfort with Grantham's Anglo elite is found in *There Was an Old Woman* (1993) where Benny discovers extraordinary cruelty and dishonesty among some of the local lawyers—one of whom causes an elderly woman to starve to death by not allowing her access to her own money.
9. Engel makes this comparison explicit in the novel. In explaining herself to Benny Cooperman in the culminating confessional scene, Hilda Blake quotes William Blake's axiom that "Everything that lives is holy" (1980, 163). The words function as an epigraph for the novel as a whole, in that the book's title, *The Suicide Murders*, points doubly to crimes antithetical, in both literal and symbolic senses, to that world view.
10. Canadian detective fiction has provided fertile ground for film adaptation. Recently the novels of both Gail Bowen and Maureen Jennings have been successfully adapted for television.
11. Generally speaking, made-for-television movies are designed to reach a much wider audience than films. Many of them are made with the idea that they will also have a significant export market in the USA or other English-speaking countries. Canadian production companies seem to think that if they can "hide" Canada, the films will have more appeal abroad, but, in truth, the consequence is the social and political blandness that comes from detachment from place. Such a purging of locality is characteristic, for example, of the series of films made from Gail Bowen's Joanne Kilbourn series. While the novels in the series are very specifically set in Saskatchewan, the film versions would appear to be set nowhere in particular. The films were made in Toronto, but it is a Toronto that is recognizable in very few shots. In fact, location is never mentioned in any of the films, and the effect is to radically diminish the films' impact since the Saskatchewan setting—along with the ethnic minorities who live there—is at the heart of what the novels set out to examine.

12. Benny's vomiting at the sight of a corpse is found in Engel's novels as well. However, there it is made clear—as it is not in the film—that while Benny is comically sickened at the sight of violated bodies, he is also pleased, to some extent, that this is the case, that he is not yet not hardened towards death. One of the defining features of Benny's humanity, to him and to his largely Canadian readership, is that he is not a hard-boiled avenger. In the novels, his having no stomach for violent death is a serious indicator of his moral position, which includes horror at violence and an unwillingness ever to become hardened to it.
13. His wilderness ineptitude might be read as doubly ironic in that Benny plays the stereotype of the urban Jewish character who is totally maladroit in matters of "wilderness" survival. At the same time, Benny is equally awkward in Toronto, where he comes off as something of a small-town rube—a role that he sometimes exploits, however, surprising the big city cops with his acumen in novels like *The Cooperman Variations* (2001).
14. One of the most amusing of the *Columbo* episodes is "Catch Me if You Can," broadcast in 1977. In this episode Columbo matches wits with Abigail Mitchell (Ruth Gordon), a famous writer of tricky and intricately plotted mystery novels. The pleasure in this episode is watching the two brilliant minds match wits. The "real" murder in the episode, committed by Mitchell, is, like her novels, expertly planned and almost flawlessly executed. Columbo, like the reader of one of her stories, follows the plot and in the end correctly deciphers the clues, throughout expressing his admiration for a worthy opponent. Benny Cooperman exhibits none of Columbo's brilliance, though the sartorial similarities and general *mein*, as played by Rubinek, reference this American television forerunner.
15. The novel is set in late winter/early spring. When the crew came to St. Catharines to make the film, an early spring snowstorm coated the city with a layer of heavy white snow, which soon turned to brownish slush. Benny's arctic attire and the city's drabness in the film make for a depressing atmosphere that viscerally bolsters the sense of things gone awry in the Garden City. The city, which in reality is one of the sunniest in Canada, goes from stereotypical Canadian snowstorm to brown, mucky spring in the course of the film. We are grateful to our colleague Joan Nicks for her information about the circumstances surrounding the production of the film.
16. The novel makes a good deal of names, accents, and ethnic epithets. At one point Benny chides a listener, "Look, my name's Cooperman, not Zekerman. Maybe from your side of the table there's not much difference in the sound. [But] if you think all cats are alike in the dark, you're crazy" (1980, 135). At another point, he observes of his friend Staziak that he "had as much chance of being related to the dear departed [Chester Yates] as I did" (48). Benny's sensitivity around being Jewish in Grantham is captured by his hearing a waitress's offer of "soup or juice" as "Super Jews" (50). His proficiency in pretending to be "Father Murphy," a Roman Catholic priest, in order to obtain Martha Tracy's phone number is attributed to his high school role in *Finian's Rainbow*, the kind of ethnic dramatic fare deemed suitable for performance by the youth of this Wasp city (23).

17. A more detailed look at the Grantham Jewish community is offered in *A City Called July* (1986), where minority citizens do not report a crime for fear of the reaction of their fellow citizens.
18. Niagara is famous for its fruitlands and vineyards. It is also famous for its factories and the pollution that is carelessly dumped into the Great Lakes, the Niagara River, and the canals that crisscross Niagara. The burgeoning population of the area, which is rapidly becoming a bedroom community for Greater Toronto, puts continual pressure on agricultural lands. Omitting this aspect of the novel diminishes Benny's ethical concerns around the unrestricted development in and around his hometown—a concern shared by many in Niagara.

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## Filmography/Videography

- The Cheap Detective* (Moore, USA, 1978)
- Chinatown* (Polanski, USA, 1974)
- Columbo* (NBC 1972-1977; ABC 1989-1993)
- Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (Reiner, USA, 1982)
- The Long Goodbye* (Altman, USA, 1973)
- Murder Sees the Light* (Hart, Canada, 1986)
- The Suicide Murders* (Parker, Canada, 1985)
- Taking the Falls* (Kennedy, Canada, 1995)