Kaspoit!
by Dennis E. Bolen

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

*Kaspoit!* is a crime novel ripped from the headlines, based on a case still before the courts.

The DNA of dozens of missing women has been recovered from a pig farm east of Vancouver. One of the farm’s owners has been convicted of the murder of some of the women and the conviction is being appealed (awaiting the Supreme Court ruling at the time of writing). This news story is seminal to *Kaspoit!* The names have been changed.

The term “kaspoit” is defined as “the natural noise of a beer can being opened” (vi, unpaginated). It is an appropriate soundtrack to the story, but as a title, *Kaspoit!* trips us and interferes with word of mouth. Who’s going to open a conversation with “I’m reading a really interesting book whose title I cannot pronounce. But you may not like it anyway.”

You may not like *Kaspoit!* for several reasons. First, it should come with a warning. This novel is dark. It contains explicit depictions of sexual activity, extreme violence, and language many will find offensive.

You also may not like it because of its style. *Kaspoit!* is a screenplay thinly disguised as a novel. It comes complete with scene headings, locations, times of day, and a compoundword summary of the action, all parading as chapter titles. Furthermore, the story is revealed almost exclusively through dialogue. Bolen is pushing the limits of minimalism, yet the reader soon realizes that description would be extraneous. We’ve seen the pictures; we know the types. Who needs verbose transitions? We can figure it out; we can, for the most part, follow. Words flash images directly into the reader’s brain: “popopopopopopbangbangbang . . . GunPause” (137). Think Pulp Fiction. Brave. Audacious even. And yet, ultimately, revolting.

The third reason you may not like this book is because this story is your worst nightmare. Its characters have no redeeming features. These guys will come after you; they will hurt your loved ones. There is no place to hide. Motivated by sex, fuelled by booze and drugs, excited by violence, rewarded by bundles of cash, the people in this dark underworld are sociopathic, homicidal, sadistic. Biker-like gangsters run the show. The boss Roberta is called to Quebec for a “business meeting” and never
returns. Gort, the slacker second in charge, defaults into command, bolstered by his minions. His dancer girlfriend disappears and his delinquent “skinner” son ends up with a hole in his head (but only after he has inadvertently killed his own girlfriend. Oops!). The pig farmer Friendly (Freddie), his brother Stew and sister Rosa are portrayed as “under contract” to the gang. A new accountant, Na, wiggles her way in. The puppet-master police inspector reveals himself. A social worker and a guardian looking for a missing girl see too much and are bumped off. You need to take a shower after spending time with any of these characters.

Bolen hooks his readers with fragments of truth. We all know that biker gangs sell a few drugs to keep up the payments on the clubhouse. That they also have business interests in bars and dancers and prostitutes, contacts in chop shops and junkyards, and reliable weapons dealers. That they buy legitimate businesses in order to launder money.

We know that too many dumped bodies were being discovered off remote mountain roads and that the criminals had to find a more effective method of disposal. We know the pig farm was owned by three siblings, that it was a party house, that all sorts of people visited. We know about rumours of snuff parties. We know that there was a witness to hanging bodies and butchering. We know that the sole accused remained silent in court, allowing the suspicion to flourish that he did not have the intellectual ability to plan and conceal such crimes over several years.

We also know—a point crucial to this novel’s plot—that organized crime grooms and places its people in strategic locations within port authorities, airport security, border services, corrections, and police. These facts are the backstory to Kaspoit! It is not a giant swallow to accept the next bite—that this particular series of crimes could not have continued for such a long time without the help of a friend or friends in high places.

So, you may not like this story because it portrays a dark world of no-good characters in which evil wins. You may not like a story that asks you to suspect our national police. Or you may hesitate simply because some of the details are just too over the top—the “accidental” deaths, the collateral damage that ramps up the body count, would seem like hyperbole if it weren’t for all the “Missing! Last seen . . .” posters on windows and poles. Or if the book were not dedicated “In Memory of Louise Pargetter,” a parole officer killed on duty.

Kaspoit! is a cautionary tale. It lets us peer into the corrupted minds of organized criminals, who have no morals or empathy and are poised to take over our society. It forces us to look. The horror! The horror! With his familiar plot devices, character revelation, shocking language, and confrontational style, Bolen has ripped away the romantic veil from gangsters. But his goal seems to be more subversive than that. There’s a clue in the old counterculture saying: “Reality is a cop-out for those who can’t do
drugs.” Bolen is suggesting that those who prefer not to see the horror are coping out. Our comfortable, blinkered realities are hiding places where we ignore the truth and exempt ourselves from responsibility. People know, yet they continue to buy drugs and sex and hot goods. They/we do nothing about the horrors that come with forbidden fruit, participating in them as surely as if they/we were accepting a cut.

Perhaps cynicism is just an occupational hazard. Did Bolen’s years as a parole officer colour his way of seeing the world? It’s not as if Vancouver is Juarez, or Canada Mexico. But Bolen does not leave us this easy out. He introduces Kaspot! with an epigraph from Carl Jung: “Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is” (i, unpaginated). If a nation can have an identity, it must follow that it also has a shadow.

Kaspot! is a kaleidoscope of shifting colours and bold brush strokes, all of them shades of darkness. The flashes of light are gunshot flares, shattering illusions. Kaspot! is a shard of glass, a smashed bottle carving WAKE UP, CANADA! in blood on flesh. It is a beer-can mirror shoved in our faces, trying to force us to see ourselves. It is not a pretty picture.

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