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Writer and comedian Charles Demers lives in Vancouver. (Joshua Berson)

The Next Chapter 14:38 Charles Demers on 3 favourite mysteries set in Vancouver

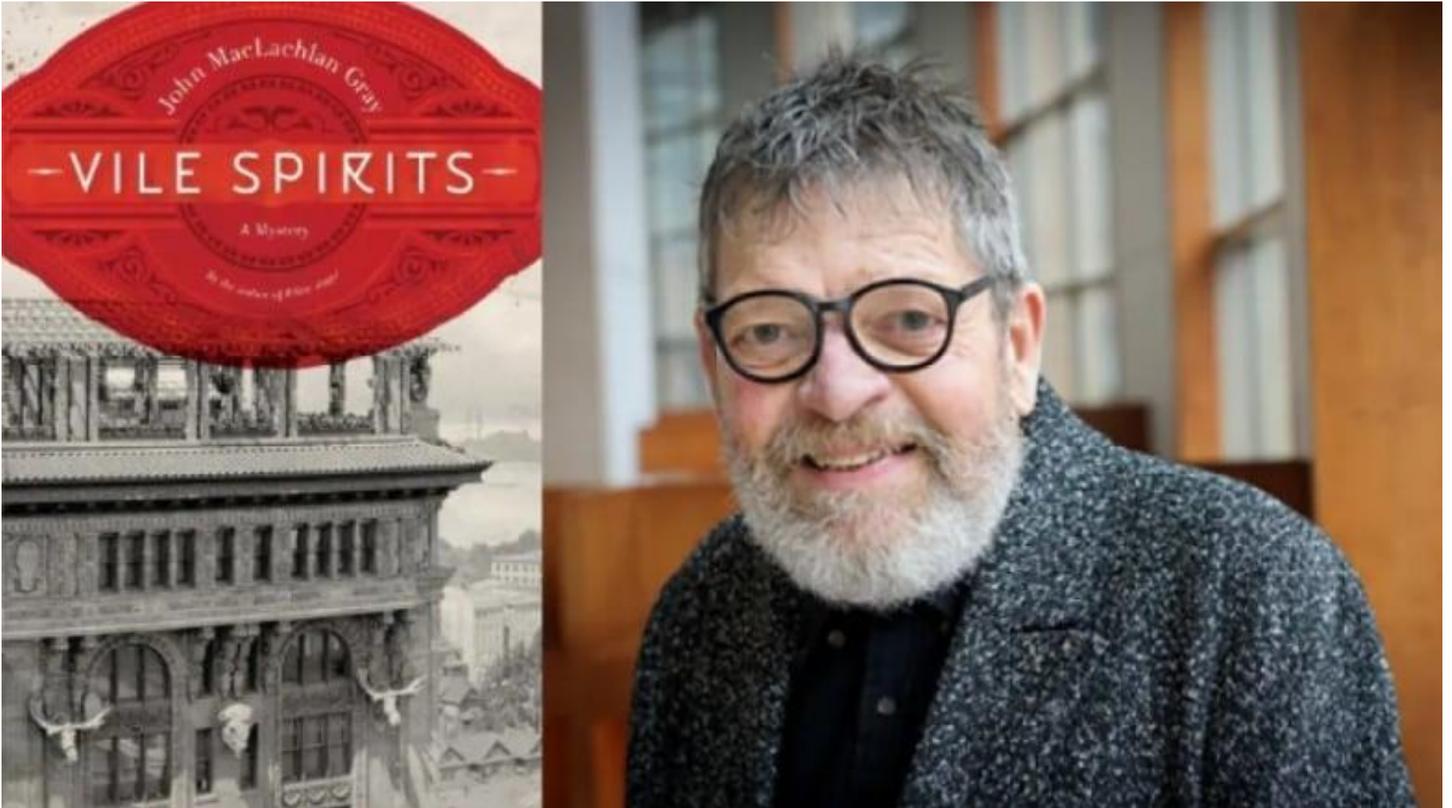
Vancouver-based Charles Demers is a writer, comedian, voice actor and playwright.

His 2009 collection of essays, *Vancouver Special*, was shortlisted for the Hubert Evans Non-Fiction Prize. He is also the author of *The Horrors*, *Property Values* and *Primary Obsessions*, the first book in the Annick Boudreau mystery series, for which he draws on [his own longtime experience with](#)

[cognitive behavioural therapy](#). *Primary Obsessions* was shortlisted for the 2021 BC and Yukon Book Prizes.

He told Shelagh Rogers about three other mystery novels set in Vancouver.

***Vile Spirits* by John MacLachlan Gray**



Vile Spirits is a novel by John MacLachlan Gray. (Douglas & McIntyre)

"This is from John MacLachlan Gray, the great Canadian playwright and composer. He of course is probably most famous for his legendary Canadian play *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. And that sort of World War I sensibility is alive in his series of mysteries set in Vancouver in the postwar period that began with *The White Angel*, which was a sort of lightly fictionalized murder mystery around the actual mystery surrounding the murder of Janet Smith, which was an early 20th-century killing in Vancouver. And his followup, *Vile Spirits*, is set in that same world and involves the same sleuths — the same three heroes are involved in unraveling what's going on.

"But this time, his story is pretty much built from the ground up. It takes place in the real world of B.C. and Vancouver politics at the time. It's set in 1925, but there's no clear historical story that is the one sort of wellspring for the novel.

"When you're writing a period piece, it is so hard to write something that is pleasant to read. It's fun to spend time in this world, but it is not nostalgic. *Vile Spirits*, I think, could have been quite irresponsible if it were a world that the reader wanted to get back to by the end of the story, because we're talking about a world where the Ku Klux Klan is sort of running rampant in Vancouver. This is a very exclusionary early settler version of the city that is wearing its British imperialist colonialist stripes on its sleeves.

“The humor at a certain point bleeds into a kind of Kafkaesque absurdism, and it actually heightens your sense of jeopardy.”

"I think there would have been something kind of politically unsettling to paint that version of the city as 'simpler times' or something to kind of get back to or, a sort of fun historical daydream. At the same time, you do want to write a book that people want to inhabit, at least for the time that they're reading. And somehow he strikes that balance. You're always fascinated by this world.

"The dialogue in *Vile Spirits* is sometimes absolutely hilarious. And the other thing that happens with the comedy is that rather than lessening the sense of danger, the humour at a certain point bleeds into a kind of Kafkaesque absurdism, and it actually heightens your sense of jeopardy.

"A big part of the action revolves around the genesis of British Columbia's notoriously bureaucratic and self-serving liquor licensing laws. And at first, you're kind of giggling about all these rules until you get into the place where you realize that the absurdity and the contradiction and the hypocrisy were all built in for a reason. And then the absurdity becomes part of the air of menace in the story."

- [Why Arthur Ellis Award-nominated crime writer John MacLachlan Gray doesn't write for success or fame](#)

[Blood Sports](#) by Eden Robinson



Blood Sports is a 2007 novel by B.C. writer Eden Robinson. (McClelland & Stewart)

"This is a book that I reviewed when it came out in hardcover many years ago, and I had forgotten in the ensuing years just how harrowing and absolutely terrifying a book this is. It's just the most disturbing book in the world — and you cannot stop reading it. I mean, you cannot put it away.

"It's the story of this young couple living along Commercial Drive at the end of the 1990s, when East Vancouver still really was leaning primarily in that kind of working-class, rough-around-the-edges direction. And the book discusses how it was still one of the last footholds of affordable Vancouver.

"This couple that we're following, Tom and Polly, have a baby girl, Mel. This is a couple that rides the bus — not because it's an environmental choice, but because that's what they can afford to ride. And you can tell they both have a history, but they're just trying to make it. But it's also clear that their shared past is lapping at their ankles — and soon it's lapping a lot higher than their ankles.

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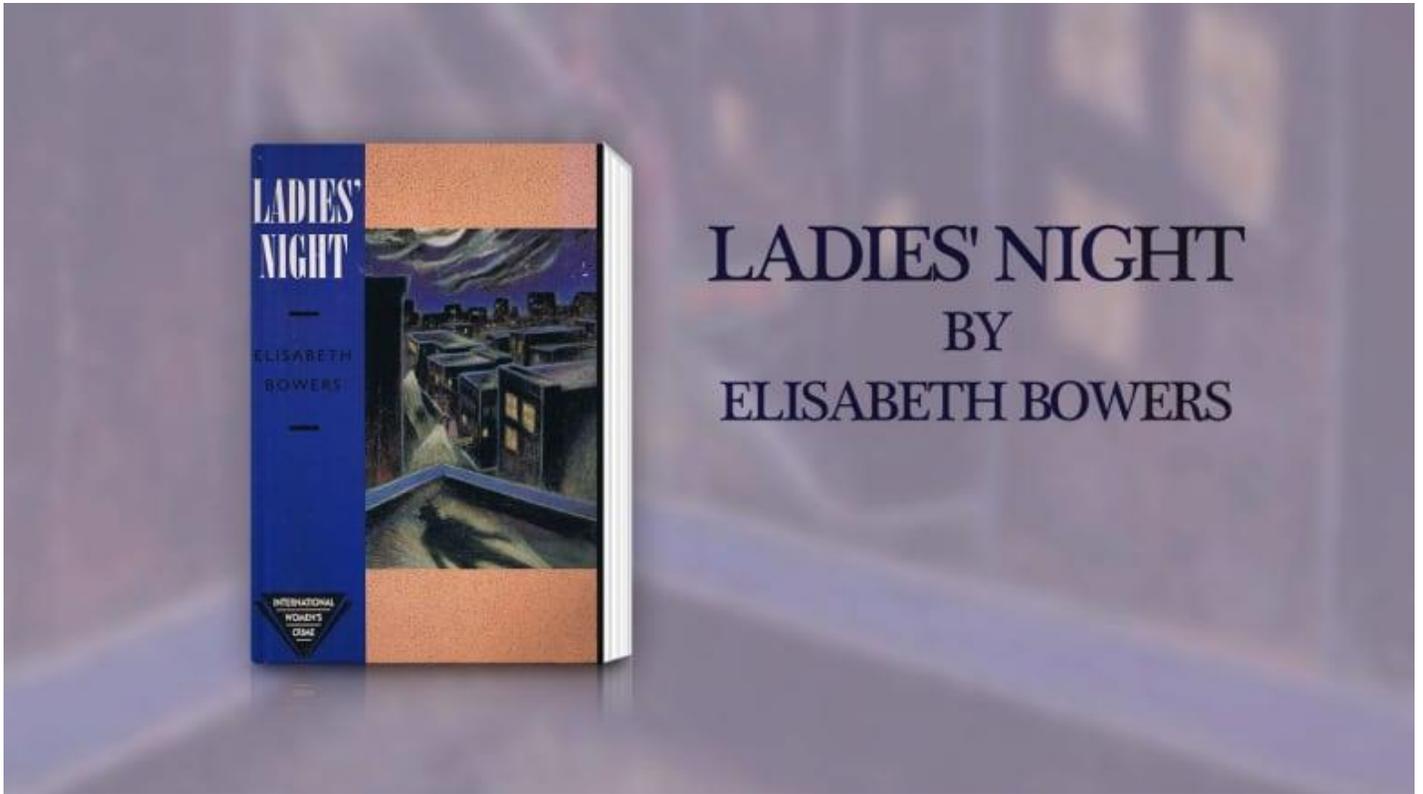
"And it all kind of comes in the shape of Tom's cousin, Jeremy, who is about to get out of prison, and a briefcase of money Tom has hidden away in a rundown hotel in the Downtown Eastside. And over the course of the story, through a combination of letters and transcriptions of VHS tapes and all kinds of devices that Robinson is using, you learn the way how these two came together and what ultimately is probably going to tear them apart.

"Playful' is such a strange word to use in relation to the subject matter in this story. But it is playful in the way that this story is unravelled for the reader — all these very unconventional ways of telling the story. She keeps shifting who the narrator is. Sometimes the story is being told in letters, but it's also being told in letters that are abandoned halfway through by the person who's writing them. There are long passages of very important action that are described in transcriptions by, one imagines, police or court bureaucrats, of VHS tapes that have been submitted as court evidence.

"You absolutely get a hint of this major author coming into her powers."

- [Why *Trickster* author Eden Robinson became a writer — and how she keeps getting better](#)

***Ladies' Night* by Elizabeth Bowers**



Elizabeth Bowers' 1988 mystery novel *Ladies' Night* was a finalist for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel. (Seal Press)

"This is a brilliant feminist mystery novel set in mid-1980s Vancouver, when it was written, and touching on issues of class, marriage and identity. It touches on video technology, which it deals with in this kind of language of video being sort of the new thing on the horizon that's about to change everybody's way of life.

“This is a story that gets into some real dark stuff about what might be going on in this little part of the city, but in a way that is always illuminating and is just wonderfully written.”

"It's this incredible book that has kind of disappeared from memory. And it's incredible to me that it's out of print — I do hope that some enterprising Canadian publisher rectifies that. But it's absolutely about 40 years ahead of its time in terms of its sophistication on our social or political outlook.

"But it's also just an absolutely fantastic story about this private investigator, Meg Lacey, who is recently divorced so is also adjusting to a totally new sort of socioeconomic status. Bowers begins the story by wrapping up a failed investigation into the disappearance of one man's daughter and then begins an investigation into the disappearance of another daughter.

"Only this time, it's the disappearance of the daughter of a wealthy family living in the British properties on Vancouver's North Shore. And their daughter has skipped out on her engagement to this wealthy young man who owns a nightclub in Vancouver. Drawn into that investigation, Meg realizes that this guy is involved in some very shady stuff, including the production of illegal underage pornography.

"And again, like with Eden's novel, this is a story that gets into some real dark stuff about what might be going on in this little part of the city, but in a way that is always illuminating and that always feels real and is just wonderfully written."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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