

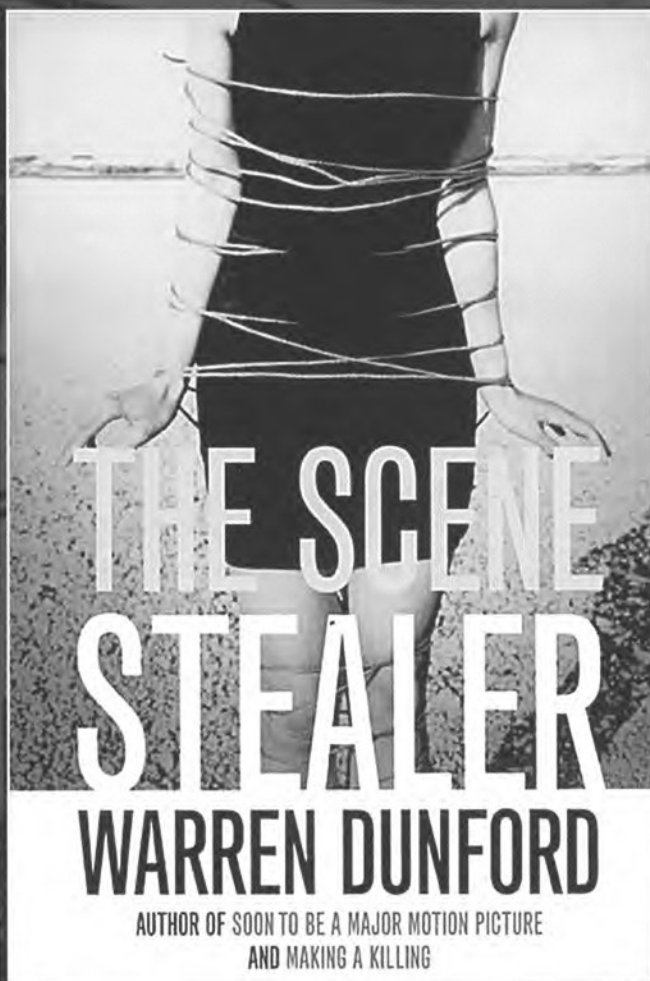
*The Scene Stealer* by Warren Dunford, Cormorant Books, Toronto, 2005. 355 pages. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Lindsay Gibb

To crack open *The Scene Stealer* is more like watching a film than devouring a novel. As in many recent movies, the storyline jumps around in chronology. The book starts in the middle, jumps back in time to offer some sort of explanation for the events, and then brings us to the cliffhanger conclusion. This, paired with the obsessively visual narrative such as “Clayton was particularly handsome—in his late thirties with close-cut wavy black hair, high cheekbones and bright blue eyes. But he was blandly dressed in a white shirt and burgundy tie,” creates the filmic feel. The author, Warren Dunford, attempted a career as a screenwriter before switching to novel writing, and it shows.

*The Scene Stealer* is his latest novel in a trilogy of stories that take place inside the Canadian film industry, and it rides a fine line between intoxicating and laughable. Each of his books (the first two being *Soon to be a Major Motion Picture* and *Making a Killing*) follow the life of screenwriter Mitchell Draper as he gets stuck in dangerous situations while working on films in Toronto. This time Draper and his friends are working on a film based on a true story—that is, within the context of the book—of the kidnapping of a famous actress, Gabriella Hartman, who has been struggling for years against rumours that she staged an earlier kidnapping.

So Draper writes a screenplay to help his friend clear her name and prove to the world that she has been telling the truth. Just as his screenplay is ready to go into production, Hartman is kidnapped (again), this time in front of Draper, exactly as it is written in his script.



That *Scene Stealer* reads like a film script isn't always a neat quirk. In fact, in the beginning, Dunford's style is so obvious that it is distracting. Every character is described in exhaustive detail. The triviality of the visual elements throughout the book is even more striking because the story is narrated by the main character. It gives the impression early on that Draper is superficial and may care more about the looks of the people around him than he does about the fate of his friend.

Dunford's descriptive writing style does create a vibrant picture of Toronto, referring to streets by name and taking his characters to restaurants and locations

that actually exist. Draper seems to love Toronto, and the descriptions of familiar Torontonion iconography such as Swiss Chalet, Citytv, the CBC and CFRB leave a warm feeling for those who know these institutions well. There is even a mention of *Take One* near the beginning of the novel, when Draper happily receives an issue that features an article about his career. “From deep in the bag, I pulled out the reason for my excitement; a hot-off-the-press copy of *Take One* magazine, the bible of the Canadian film industry.” He said it.

Dunford's greatest strength is his ability to create suspense. In the end, what really makes this book a page-turner is the nagging question of what happened to Gabriella Hartman. Draper speculates on so many different scenarios that it's impossible not to read the last 100 pages in one sitting.

This book is similar to current Hollywood films. In order to get full enjoyment out of it, one can't be too picky about the plausibility of the plot, or expect poetics in the prose. It serves the same function as a fluff film; it is a light story chock full of suspense, twists and turns. You just have to be in the right mood to enjoy it.