

'Ruth Rendell's mesmerising capacity to shock, chill
and disturb is unmatched' *THE TIMES*



From Doon with Death



RUTH
RENDELL

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY KATE HAMER

PENGUIN BOOKS

FROM DOON WITH DEATH

Ruth Rendell was an exceptional crime writer, and will be remembered as a legend in her own lifetime. Her groundbreaking debut novel, *From Doon With Death*, was first published in 1964 and introduced the reader to her enduring and popular detective, Inspector Reginald Wexford, who went on to feature in twenty-three of her subsequent novels.

With worldwide sales of approximately 20 million copies, Rendell was a regular *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her sixty bestselling novels include police procedurals, some of which have been successfully adapted for TV, stand-alone psychological mysteries, and a third strand of crime novels under the pseudonym Barbara Vine. Very much abreast of her times, the Wexford books in particular often engaged with social or political issues close to her heart.

Rendell won numerous awards, including the Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger for 1976's best crime novel with *A Demon in My View*, a Gold Dagger award for *Live Flesh* in 1986, and the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990. In 1991 she was awarded the Crime Writers' Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained excellence in crime writing. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE and in 1997 became a Life Peer.

Ruth Rendell died in May 2015.

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Praise for Ruth Rendell

‘Rendell was unequivocally the most brilliant
mystery writer of our time’

Patricia Cornwell

‘Rendell’s novels have been a major force in
lifting crime writing out of genre fiction and into
both cutting-edge and mainstream literature’

Jeanette Winterson

‘When many of the literary novelists of
our time are forgotten, Ruth Rendell’s books
will remain, and future generations will see that
not only did she keep her readers on tenterhooks
with every book, she also wrote stories which
held up a mirror to her times’

Daily Mail

‘Ruth Rendell: one of the all-time greats’

Sophie Hannah

‘Rendell set an extraordinarily high benchmark in
crime fiction that continued throughout her long
career. She is revered by all who came after her’

Ian Rankin

‘Rendell transformed what had become a staid
and formulaic genre into a different kind of crime
novel. She turned it into a prism for examining
the world around her with a critical eye’

Val McDermid

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‘Rendell used twisting plots to expose
twisted minds. Her best books are the
equal of Highsmith’s’
Observer

‘One of the most successful practitioners
of modern English crime-writing’
The Times

‘Rendell was a prolific and hugely popular
writer of intricately plotted mystery novels that
combined psychological insight, social conscience
and, not infrequently, teeth-chattering terror’
New York Times

‘Ms Rendell exercises a grip as relentless
as an anaconda’s’
Guardian

‘Ruth Rendell was unquestionably the
most important British crime novelist of
the past 50 years’
Mail on Sunday

‘Rendell is a great storyteller who knows
how to make sure that the reader has to turn
the pages out of a desperate need to find out
what is going to happen next’
Sunday Times

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Also available by Ruth Rendell

Omnibuses

Collected Short Stories
Collected Short Stories 2
Wexford: An Omnibus
The Second Wexford Omnibus
The Third Wexford Omnibus
The Fourth Wexford Omnibus
The Fifth Wexford Omnibus
Three Cases for Chief Inspector
Wexford
The Ruth Rendell Omnibus
The Second Ruth Rendell
Omnibus
The Third Ruth Rendell
Omnibus

Chief Inspector Wexford Novels

From Doon with Death
A New Lease of Death
Wolf to the Slaughter
The Best Man to Die
A Guilty Thing Surprised
No More Dying Then
Murder Being Once Done
Some Lie and Some Die
Shake Hands For Ever
A Sleeping Life
Put on by Cunning
The Speaker of Mandarin
An Unkindness of Ravens
The Veiled One
Kissing the Gunner's Daughter
Simisola
Road Rage
Harm Done
The Babes in the Wood
End in Tears
Not in the Flesh
The Monster in the Box
The Vault
No Man's Nightingale
Short Stories
The Fallen Curtain

Means of Evil
The Fever Tree
The New Girlfriend
The Copper Peacock
Blood Lines
Piranha to Scurfy

Novellas

Heartstones
The Thief

Non-Fiction

Ruth Rendell's Suffolk
The Reason Why: An Anthology
of the Murderous Mind

Novels

To Fear a Painted Devil
Vanity Dies Hard
The Secret House of Death
One Across, Two Down
The Face of Trespass
A Demon in My View
A Judgement in Stone
Make Death Love Me
The Lake of Darkness
Master of the Moor
The Killing Doll
The Tree of Hands
Live Flesh
Talking to Strange Men
The Bridesmaid
Going Wrong
The Crocodile Bird
A Sight for Sore Eyes
Adam and Eve and Pinch Me
The Rottweiler
Thirteen Steps Down
The Water's Lovely
Portobello
Tigerlily's Orchids
The Saint Zita Society
The Girl Next Door
Dark Corners

From Doon with Death

RUTH
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The verses at the beginning of each chapter and the
inscriptions in Minna's books all appear in
The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse

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For Don

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INTRODUCTION

As an avid reader in my teens, I devoured most books that came my way, an eclectic mix – many of the classics, the set school texts. Then came the thrill of discovering writers like Angela Carter – wild, bloody and exciting stories, kinetic writing. However, the classic crime genre left me a little bit numb. There seemed to me a disconnect at the heart of it: crimes diluted to who did what with what instrument in a certain room, making them appear curiously cold, curiously off-stage. Fantasy crimes that happened to tranquil lives in idyllic places to often privileged people. Raymond Chandler was the exception who I enjoyed for the laconic charm, the humour, the language and the exotic locations. That was about it in the crime stakes – until Ruth Rendell.

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It was *Make Death Love Me* that first fell into my hands and I knew straight away this was different. In it, the manager of a branch of the Anglian-Victorian bank in a small Suffolk town, sleepwalking through life, does not suddenly start committing crime in an otherwise peaceful life. He is already a fantasist, trapped with wild dreams of escape. The fuel is there, it only needs the spark of a botched bank robbery to ignite it, and that's what makes all the difference. The crime was not out of the blue; you sense it has been forged over years and years before the written story even starts. I *believed* this book. Yes, there was that curious sense when as a reader you believe a book, that somehow those characters existed before the first line was written and you feel the weight of their history.

Rendell's work has a hyperrealistic quality to it; the reader is trapped in a locked box with the characters, their fears and their obsessions. They are human beings, like the people we know. Reading her work can be like stumbling through a bad dream, but one that is so compelling and superbly plotted you cannot tear yourself away. As the *Telegraph* noted, Rendell is the expert in 'the mean streets of the mind' and in her books chance, motive and psychology all intersect to form the boiling cauldron of the plot.

Ruth Rendell was extraordinarily prolific in a career that spanned fifty years, in which she wrote more than seventy books. She won too many awards to list, although it's worth noting that her four Gold Daggers from the Crime Writers' Association are unmatched.

Her work spans three different segments. First, the Inspector Wexford series that began from this

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book, *From Doon with Death*, published in 1964. Her second book did not continue the series immediately: *To Fear a Painted Devil*, published in 1965, was a stand-alone crime thriller without Wexford. Then, in 1986, she wrote a book that she believed felt very different from her previous mix of thrillers and Wexfords – so much so that *A Dark-Adapted Eye* was published under a different name, Barbara Vine. Writing as the latter, she focused far more on the interior life, the mechanics of the family and the psychodrama of crime – as did all the ‘Barbara Vines’. Within these three loose categories, Rendell was able to dig around in nooks and crannies of crime and it gave her extraordinary freedom to explore the genre as fully as possible. In interviews she spoke about how, when she began writing a novel, there was no doubt about which category it would fall into. This clarity of purpose is remarkable in a writer.

Debating the demarcations between crime and literary fiction now seems rather old-fashioned, but there is no doubt that Ruth Rendell expanded the crime genre enormously, creatively and with passion and clear-eyed writing. To me, many of Rendell’s books have the feeling of another writer who I didn’t encounter until much later – the American, mid-twentieth-century author Shirley Jackson. Although I cannot recall anything overtly supernatural in Rendell’s works, as there is in Jackson’s work such as *The Haunting of Hill House*, there is the same thread of creeping unease, the feeling of something very bad behind that closed door that might be opened with the next page. A sense that the human

mind drives the events, yet the characters are only dimly aware of this and the consequences of their actions can come as a surprise. Rendell captures this vagueness of intention perfectly.

She writes outsiders brilliantly – the dispossessed, spurned, obsessive, those who don't and will never fit in. Ruth Rendell served in the House of Lords as a Labour Party life peer with the grand title of Baroness Rendell of Babergh, and her progressive political views thread through her books. Social repression, inequality and discrimination, racism and domestic violence all feature in her work and she describes the complex conditions of poverty with wide-open eyes. This never feels forced or shoehorned into the mysteries but part of a genuine interest in the mechanics of inequality and how they play out in wider society. She also actively campaigned on issues such as female genital mutilation.

Intriguingly, she described how she grew up with two names – Ruth, and her second name Barbara – which her Swedish mother used as she found Ruth difficult to pronounce. The American preface to *The Dark-Adapted Eye* recounts: 'I don't think my parents realised this – that both my names mean or imply "a stranger in a strange land": Ruth was exiled in an alien country and Barbara signifies "a foreigner".'

She also wrote what I think is the most perfect opening line to any novel, a line most writers would covet: *A Judgement in Stone* begins, 'Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write.' It's a line that has everything. The unintended consequences of marginalisation. The drop-shock of

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the admission. An invitation to plunge in and find out everything. A complete story in itself that nevertheless still makes you want to read on.

So, we come to Chief Inspector George Wexford, famously named after Rendell holidayed in Ireland (it could have been Waterford). *From Doon with Death* was the first in a series of astonishing longevity, with twenty-four Inspector Wexford books spanning her entire career.

It's interesting that Rendell herself had no idea that this would be a series at all, let alone one that would last so long. She later wryly commented on Wexford's age – and how she wished she'd made him younger. In this first book we meet George Wexford at the age of fifty-two and already a seasoned police officer. In the final book, *No Man's Nightingale*, published five decades later, we see him still solving crime in his retirement whereas in reality he would have been over a hundred years old. No matter – it's both poetic license and a testament to the huge popularity of the county town inspector.

'I don't get sick of him because he is me,' she said of Wexford. 'He doesn't look like me, of course, but the way he thinks and his principles and his ideas and what he likes doing, that's me. So I think you don't get tired of yourself.'

The gently irascible Wexford is woven into the background of Sussex (a corner of the world Rendell was very familiar with from having lived in the county for a number of years). Margaret Parsons is an unremarkable, chapel-going woman living in the quiet, fictional town of Kingsmarkham. When her

strangled body is discovered in the nearby woods, police are baffled as to why anyone would want to kill her. Then, they discover the secret of her rare, expensive books, each one containing a passionate inscription, from someone only known as 'Doon'.

In an afterword published in a later edition, Rendell herself encouraged us to look at the book as a historical novel, and this is part of the fascination of it. It is a snapshot of the early sixties with all its contradictions and emerging themes. It's a world of pounds, shillings and pence, where the local supermarket sells plastic headscarves to women to protect their hair (set rock hard by the hairdresser, one imagines). It is also a world of sharp social contrasts where some are able to still retain paid servants in the home. Unlike Margaret Parsons, whose spotlessly clean yet shabby home is forensically described, Rendell experienced being hard-up in the early years of her marriage – something she never regretted because she felt it gave her writing on this subject an authentic voice.

Yet, this social fabric is changing, new sexual mores are permeating it. This is a tale of extramarital affairs among the heavy-set town, the Wesleyan chapel Margaret Parsons attends, and the wider farming community.

In this first book we meet George Wexford in glimpses. Much of the action is seen through a character who became more of a sidekick – Inspector Burden. There is also less of his family, his love of music and his voracious appetite for books that we see later in the series.

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However, it is as if we are meeting someone for the first time. We may form an impression of Wexford that is only partial, but already we feel we want to get to know him a whole lot better. Because of Rendell's extraordinary, prolific talent, we have twenty-three more chances to do just that.

Kate Hamer, 2024

You have broken my heart. There, I have written it. Not for you to read, Minna, for this letter will never be sent, never shrink and wither under your laughter, little lips prim and pleated, laughter like dulcimer music . . .

Shall I tell you of the Muse who awaited me? I wanted you to walk beside me into her vaulted halls. There were the springs of Helicon! I would furnish you with the food of the soul, the bread that is prose and the wine that is poetry. Ah, the wine, Minna . . . This is the rose-red blood of the troubadour!

Never shall I make that journey, Minna, for when I brought you the wine you returned to me the waters of indifference. I wrapped the bread in gold but you hid my loaves in the crock of contempt.

Truly you have broken my heart and dashed the wine-cup against the wall . . .

1

Call once yet,
In a voice that she will know:
'Margaret, Margaret!'

Matthew Arnold, *The Forsaken Merman*

'I think you're getting things a bit out of proportion, Mr Parsons,' Burden said. He was tired and he'd been going to take his wife to the pictures. Besides, the first things he'd noticed when Parsons brought him into the room were the books in the rack by the fireplace. The titles were enough to give the most level-headed man the jitters, quite enough to make a man anxious where no ground for anxiety existed: *Palmer the Poisoner*, *The Trial of Madeleine Smith*, *Three Drowned Brides*, *Famous Trials*, *Notable British Trials*.

'Don't you think your reading has been preying on your mind?'

'I'm interested in crime,' Parsons said. 'It's a hobby of mine.'

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'I can see that.' Burden wasn't going to sit down if he could avoid it. 'Look, you can't say your wife's actually missing. You've been home one and a half hours and she isn't here. That's all. She's probably gone to the pictures. As a matter of fact I'm on my way there now with my wife. I expect we'll meet her coming out.'

'Margaret wouldn't do that, Mr Burden. I know her and you don't. We've been married nearly six years and in all that time I've never come home to an empty house.'

'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll drop in on my way back. But you can bet your bottom dollar she'll be home by then.' He started moving towards the door. 'Look, get on to the station if you like. It won't do any harm.'

'No, I won't do that. It was just with you living down the road and being an inspector . . .'

And being off duty, Burden thought. If I was a doctor instead of a policeman I'd be able to have private patients on the side. I bet he wouldn't be so keen on my services if there was any question of a fee.

Sitting in the half-empty dark cinema he thought: Well, it is funny. Normal ordinary wives as conventional as Mrs Parsons, wives who always have a meal ready for their husbands on the dot of six, don't suddenly go off without leaving a note.

'I thought you said this was a good film,' he whispered to his wife.

'Well, the critics liked it.'

'Oh, critics,' he said.

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Another man, that could be it. But Mrs Parsons? Or it could be an accident. He'd been a bit remiss not getting Parsons to phone the station straight away.

'Look, love,' he said. 'I can't stand this. You stay and see the end. I've got to get back to Parsons.'

'I wish I'd married that reporter who was so keen on me.'

'You must be joking,' Burden said. 'He'd have stayed out all night putting the paper to bed. Or the editor's secretary.'

He charged up Tabard Road, then made himself stroll when he got to the Victorian house where Parsons lived. It was all in darkness, the curtains in the big bay downstairs undrawn. The step was whitened, the brass kerb above it polished. Mrs Parsons must have been a house-proud woman. Must have been? Why not, still was?

Parsons opened the door before he had a chance to knock. He still looked tidy, neatly dressed in an oldish suit, his tie knotted tight. But his face was greenish grey. It reminded Burden of a drowned face he had once seen on a mortuary slab. They had put the glasses back on the spongy nose to help the girl who had come to identify him.

'She hasn't come back,' he said. His voice sounded as if he had a cold coming. But it was probably only fear.

'Let's have a cup of tea,' Burden said. 'Have a cup of tea and talk about it.'

'I keep thinking what could have happened to her. It's so open round here. I suppose it would be, being country.'

'It's those books you read,' Burden said. 'It's not healthy.' He looked again at the shiny paper covers. On the spine of one was a jumble of guns and knives against a blood-red background. 'Not for a layman,' he said. 'Can I use your phone?'

'It's in the front room.'

'I'll get on to the station. There might be something from the hospitals.'

The front room looked as if nobody ever sat in it. With some dismay he noted its polished shabbiness. So far he hadn't seen a stick of furniture that looked less than fifty years old. Burden went into all kinds of houses and he knew antique furniture when he saw it. But this wasn't antique and nobody could have chosen it because it was beautiful or rare. It was just old. Old enough to be cheap, Burden thought, and at the same time young enough not to be expensive. The kettle whistled and he heard Parsons fumbling with china in the kitchen. A cup crashed on the floor. It sounded as if they had kept the old concrete floor. It was enough to give anyone the creeps, he thought again, sitting in these high-ceilinged rooms, hearing unexplained inexplicable creaks from the stairs and the cupboard, reading about poison and hangings and blood.

'I've reported your wife as missing,' he said to Parsons. 'There's nothing from the hospitals.'

Parsons turned on the light in the back room and Burden followed him in. It must have a weak bulb under the parchment lampshade that hung from the centre of the ceiling. About sixty watts, he thought. The shade forced all the light down, leaving the

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ceiling, with its plaster decorations of bulbous fruit, dark and in the corners blotched with deeper shadow. Parsons put the cups down on the sideboard, a vast mahogany thing more like a fantastic wooden house than a piece of furniture, with its tiers and galleries and jutting beaded shelves. Burden sat down in a chair with wooden arms and seat of brown corduroy. The lino struck cold through the thick soles of his shoes.

‘Have you any idea at all where your wife could have gone?’

‘I’ve been trying to think. I’ve been racking my brains. I can’t think of anywhere.’

‘What about her friends? Her mother?’

‘Her mother’s dead. We haven’t got any friends here. We only came here six months ago.’

Burden stirred his tea. Outside it had been close, humid. Here in this thick-walled dark place, he supposed, it must always feel like winter.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I don’t like to say this, but somebody’s bound to ask you. It might as well be me. Could she have gone out with some man? I’m sorry, but I had to ask.’

‘Of course you had to ask. I know, it’s all in here.’ He tapped the bookcase. ‘Just routine enquiries, isn’t it? But you’re wrong. Not Margaret. It’s laughable.’ He paused, not laughing. ‘Margaret’s a good woman. She’s a lay preacher at the Wesleyan place down the road.’

No point in pursuing it, Burden thought. Others would ask him, probe into his private life whether he liked it or not, if she still hadn’t got home when