

Moths And Murder

Cleeves' latest among her best

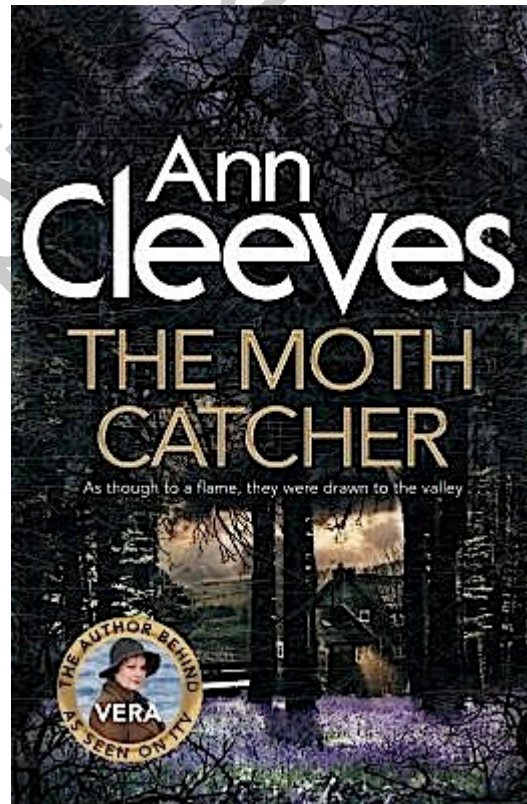
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

One of the most accomplished crime writers in Britain today, Ann Cleeves' novels are always eagerly awaited by her many fans. Although she has sixteen stand-alones to her credit, Cleeves is perhaps best known for her seven DCI Vera Stanhope novels and, more recently, her Shetland series of tales, both of which have been filmed for television. Her latest effort is fully up to the mark, and readers are in for a treat as Vera works her eccentric way through yet another puzzle that would baffle more conventionally-minded sleuths.

In rural Northumberland, returning home from a visit to a local pub, an elderly man discovers the body of a young man lying in a ditch near the roadside. He phones the police. DCI Vera Stanhope, who was nearby, responds to the call, and the crime scene technicians are quick to follow. The victim's wallet reveals him to be one Patrick Randle, a university graduate student who'd been hired

to look after a nearby manor house while its owners were away in Australia. He had been bludgeoned to death.



When Vera visits the manor house the case takes on new significance: she discovers yet another body, this time in Randle's attic flat. A middle-aged man has been stabbed to death.

Vera and her team – including DC Holly Clarke, Joe Ashworth, and Billy Cartwright – waste no time in identifying persons of interest in the deaths. Among them are three couples who live nearby in a cluster of barn conversions known as Valley Farm. It seems no one saw anything; but piquing Vera's interest, the daughter of one couple, Lizzie Redhead, has been serving time in a nearby women's prison for a violent assault, and is due to be released shortly. Clearly she could not have committed the crimes. Her ex-boyfriend, though, Jason Crow, has a history of criminal behavior.

So far the tale seems straightforward enough; but it takes on new depth when Vera and her team look into the two victims' backgrounds. Randle's past seems to have been without blemish: a graduate student in ecology, he led an ordinary life. The victim found murdered in his flat, however, poses questions. Martin Benton

was a middle-aged man who had worked as a teacher until, suffering from depression, he'd quit his job and began working for a local charity dealing with recently-released ex-offenders. Benton had no obvious connection with Randle — until the police learn that both men had a consuming interest in moths. How could this arcane fact possibly explain their deaths?

Cleeves has a keen ear for rural dialogue, and a real gift for providing layered portraits of each of her characters, sharply delineated yet nicely nuanced, and she skillfully exploits these talents in painting a vivid picture of country life. Structure and pace are also hallmarks of her novels, and dominating the whole is a clever plot with unexpected twists and masterful misdirection that will keep readers engaged until the final page. All in all, an excellent read.

Originally published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, January 2016.

Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com