

Past Imperfect:

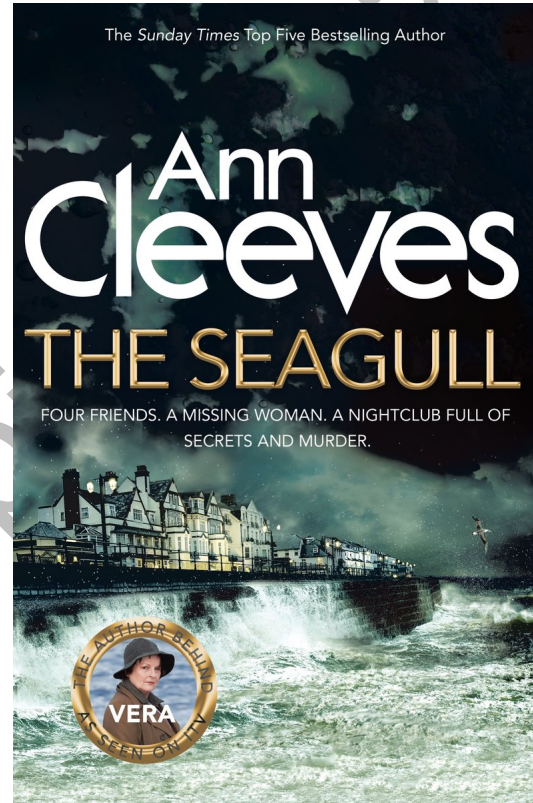
Vera confronts father's misdeeds

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Vera Stanhope encounters an old adversary while visiting Warkworth Prison in Northumbria. Not a particularly surprising event, since in her work as a DI she'd helped populate the place. But what makes it noteworthy is that the inmate she meets is her former boss, ex-Detective Superintendent John Brace, and she'd helped put him there. He's in a wheelchair now, suffering from MS, and still full of resentment for his plight.

No love lost, then. But Brace, always anxious to make the best of a bad situation, offers Vera a deal. He's concerned about his daughter on the outside: she'd married a loser who'd left her with three kids and mental-health issues, and being on the inside his ability to help her is limited. If Vera will get her some support, he'll return the favour by helping her to clear up a cold case. A man had gone missing years ago, and, although he claims to have had nothing to do with it, Brace says he knows where the body is buried—literally.



It's an intriguing proposition, made moreso because others had been involved in the crimes that put Brace behind bars, and one of them had been Vera's own father, Hector, a member of what had come to be known as the Gang of Four. Glen Fenwick, an informant who'd put Vera on their misdeeds years ago, had been killed—but not before the police had enough information to incriminate Brace.

Vera still harbours some guilt for Fenwick's death, and because only John Brace went to prison, regards the case as unfinished business.

So begins one of the best in an already-fine series of crime tales featuring Vera Stanhope, a dowdy, often politically-incorrect CID officer whose social skills border on the impaired, and who is indifferent to what others might regard as her personal failings. But alongside those one must put her skills, which include a dogged determination to pursue issues wherever they lead and a jaded outlook on life that seldom leads her astray. Her character is a refreshing addition to the world of

crime fiction, adding an insistent note of realism to the genre while eschewing the more laboured conventions of alcoholic-loners-who-fight-with-their-bosses-and-can't-keep-a-lover. Add to that Cleeves' unmistakable talent for combining deft plotting, a moody atmosphere and totally believable dialogue, and you have a sure-fire formula for literary success. The eighth in a series that has already won the hearts of countless readers and a television audience to boot, *The Seagull* only adds to the lustre of this accomplished writer. Definitely one of the best crime novels of 2017.

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§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, was published in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

