

# Broken promises, broken lives

## *Crime novel raises moral issues*

by Jim Napier

Laws and courts exist to protect the innocent and the helpless. Ideally they prevent harm, but when that isn't possible, at least the legal system can provide some measure of justice, by punishing the guilty. Right?

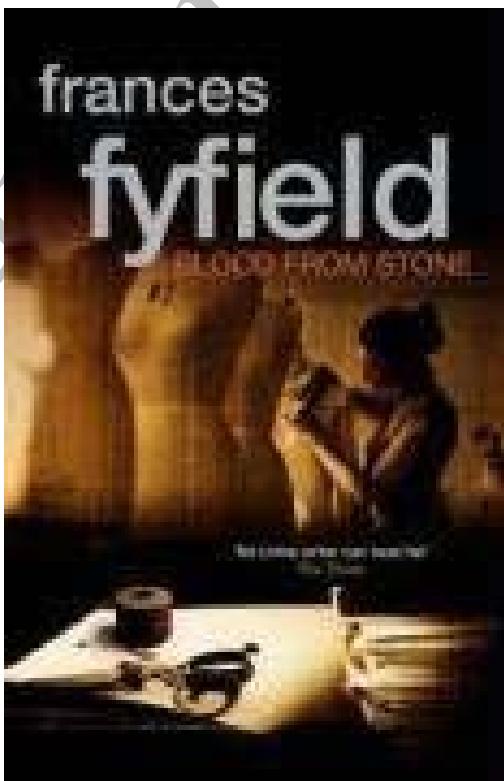
Well, perhaps not always. All too often the guilty get off, or escape with a minor punishment. We can be excused for questioning the judicial process when we read about executives of large corporations allowed to live in luxury after wiping out the savings of thousands of small investors, or see that, after murdering his wife, a major sports star hires a "dream team" of defense lawyers and walks out of the courtroom a free man. The adversarial system of pitting prosecution and defense lawyers against one another is sometimes criticized as valuing winning over justice.

This week's novel addresses some of these troubling issues. Presented as a novel, it is nonetheless a probing look at some of the moral dilemmas raised by our legal system. In its own way it is as radical and confrontational as Karl Marx's damning indictment of private enterprise in *Das Kapital*; and it will leave readers pondering disturbing questions about how our society functions at its most basic level. It is also simply a fine novel.

### ***Frances Fyfield***

Frances Fyfield grew up in rural Derbyshire, but spent most of her adult life in London, interspersed with extended visits to Norfolk and the Channel port

of Deal. Educated mostly in convent schools, after studying English she went on to qualify as a solicitor, working in London for what is now the Crown Prosecution Service. It was there that she gained some understanding of murder, albeit, she insists, at second hand. Although years later she took up writing as her real vocation, Fyfield admits that the law and its ramifications still haunt her and inform many of her novels.



Embarking on a literary career in the late 1980s, Fyfield has to date written twenty-four novels, and in the process has garnered many accolades, including multiple nominations for the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Novel (1990's *A Question of Guilt*

and *Safer Than Houses*, 2006). She was also awarded the (British) Silver Dagger in 1998 for *Deep Sleep*, and was nominated again the following year for *Staring at the Light*. In 2008 she won the Duncan Lawrie Dagger for the novel that is the subject of this review, *Blood From Stone*.

A novelist, short story writer for magazines and radio, and sometime Radio 4 contributor and presenter, when she's relaxing Fyfield can often be found in a junk/charity shop or auction. At other times she likes to spend time by the sea with a bottle of wine in the company of friends.

### ***Blood From Stone* (Little, Brown, 2008)**

In the sedate London borough of Kensington and Chelsea a middle-aged, well-dressed woman checks into an hotel. When she apparently jumps from her sixth-floor room a passing photographer records the event on film, and soon her death achieves a notoriety almost eclipsing her very public life.

The victim, Marianne Shearer, had been a prominent criminal lawyer. Shortly before her death she had successfully defended a young man, Rick Boyd, who had been accused of being a serial sexual predator. Shearer's voluminous case notes on the trial are missing; if discovered by others they threaten to send Boyd back to prison.

A young woman also takes an interest in Shearer's death, but with a rather different perspective. Henrietta Joyce was the sister of one of Boyd's victims, a woman meticulously and callously destroyed by Shearer on the witness stand, and who subsequently took her own life. Hen takes a quiet satisfaction from the barrister's death, but it does not

assuage the anger she feels toward Shearer, or the hatred she has for Boyd.

Thomas Noble is a lawyer charged with settling Marianne Shearer's estate. It is a considerable one, and includes a fashionable million-pound flat in London that her brother Frank very much covets. While detesting the man's callowness, Noble is determined to distribute his late client's estate as the law demands.

All of which raises some fascinating questions. Did Marianne Shearer in fact commit suicide, and if so, why? Could Boyd have murdered her to keep her quiet? Did Henrietta kill the lawyer to avenge her sister's death? Or did her grasping brother act on his greed? Each of these individuals are in different ways deeply flawed, and their hopes, fears and anger will draw them together in a complex tale of cunning without conscience, atonement without absolution. It is a confrontation that not everyone will survive.

### ***An accomplished tale***

*Blood From Stone* is a superb psychological thriller that leaves us pondering important moral issues. Can you kidnap someone by seduction only? To what lengths will siblings go to protect one another? And how can one resolve the inconvenience of conscience? Told through the narration of real-time events deftly combined with court transcripts and a successful lawyer's own reflections on her actions, Fyfield has devised a dark, compelling, ingeniously-crafted plot that owes a lot to the plays of the ancient Greek dramatists. She has a painter's eye for atmosphere and a poet's ear for dialogue, and her adroit use of multiple points of view enables us to plumb the

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depths of the damaged personalities that inhabit her novel.

Building on the strengths of her earlier novels, *Blood From Stone* is an accomplished and original tale, and gives lie to the belief that a murder mystery must sacrifice depth or seriousness of purpose in order to be entertaining. It confirms Fyfield's place at the very top of her craft.

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