

Quo Vadis?

Another crime novel series comes to an end

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

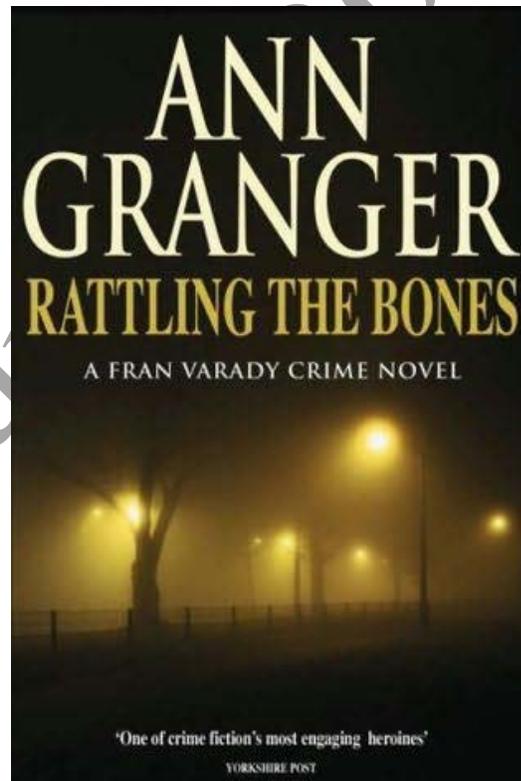
A little over a year ago I reviewed Ann Granger's debut Victorian mystery, *A Rare Interest in Corpses*. It was an exciting addition to the ranks of historical crime writing and attracted lots of praise, both from critics and from her many fans. In the intervening months Ann has returned to write what she tells me is the final chapter in her highly successful series featuring London-based private investigator Fran Varady. With the relatively recent disappearance of so many landmark figures in crime fiction (Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse and Ian Rankin's John Rebus come to mind), one is left to wonder where the genre is headed. Thankfully, the well of talent runs deep, and I've no doubt that Ann will provide us with fresh but equally intriguing tales.

Ann Granger

She is a woman of many talents and, if you'll pardon the expression, much experience. After attending London University, where she read Modern Languages, Ann put aside her aspirations for a literary career to work in British embassies throughout Europe. During a stint at the British government's Prague embassy Ann met her husband, who worked for the Foreign Office, and they married, taking up residence in such diverse locales as Zambia and Germany. Upon their return to England Ann

resumed her interest in writing, and has written almost two dozen novels to date.

In 1991 Ann published her first novel, *Say It With Poison*. The story centers on



protagonist Meredith Mitchell, who (not surprisingly) embarks on a career in the British diplomatic service and spends many years abroad, and on her return to England is joined by Chief Inspector Alan Markby. *Say It With Poison* has been followed by fourteen other novels in the Mitchell and Markby series.

With *Rattling the Bones*, the Fran Varady canon comprises seven novels

centering on a part-time actress and in-your-face private eye in inner-city London, who, with her friend the long-suffering Ganesh Patel in tow, regularly comes to the aid of the poor and the dispossessed. The audience for her books has constantly grown, and she has attracted increasing critical acclaim as well.

Ann and her husband make their home near Oxford.

Rattling the Bones
(Headline, 2007)

Fran Varady is a twenty-three year old part-time actress and private investigator with a history of homelessness. Lately, things have been marginally looking up: she shares a house provided by a charity with other, similarly-situated people. By most people's standards, it's an unconventional existence; but Fran marches to her own drummer. The daughter of dysfunctional parents whose own parents had fled the 1956 uprising in Hungary, Fran has had to piece together fragmentary accounts provided by her grandmother to comprehend her family roots. The effort left a lasting impression on Fran, along with the trait of always looking for clues, a useful skill for a PI.

The result is that of necessity Fran has become a very self-reliant and grounded young woman, forsaking the comfortable world of material possessions and conventional jobs for an independent and more rewarding life.

One day while prowling around Camden Town, Fran encounters an old friend. "Mad Edna," is a bag lady who shared a squat with Fran a few years previously, before being lost to the streets. Fran is delighted to find her, but before they can talk Edna spots someone watching her — a young man dressed all in white —

and scurries away. Fran chases the man, but loses him in the crowd. Tracking Edna down to a local hostel, she questions the old woman about why she is so terrified, but Edna refuses to talk. When Fran spies the man nearby, she gives chase, only to lose him again. Before long, however, Fran encounters the young man once more. This time he's not getting away: he's sitting on the floor behind her bosses' desk, and he's dead.

The police are disinclined to connect the killing with Edna, particularly when there's reason to believe the victim had a key to the detective agency's offices. When Edna lands in the hospital after being nearly hit by a motorcycle, and the ranking CID officer dismisses Fran's concerns, she decides it's up to her to try to save Edna's life. Before events play themselves out Fran will herself be targeted by a killer, and her obsession for always going it alone will not make her life easier.

An evocative tale

As I've noted previously Ann Granger is a fine storyteller, with a particular gift for entering the world of the socially dispossessed. In describing Edna's circumscribed world Granger paints an insightful portrait of the lives of people invisible to most of us:

"For most 'normal' people the world of the homeless and kinless is a foreign land... This curiously distorted 'other' world follows a weird logic. It operates by its own rules, its own patterns and sometimes even keeps its own clock... Those who really have nowhere else to lay their heads but the street often choose to sleep by day when the thoroughfare is fully of busy unheeding passers-by and

pollution-spilling traffic. At night, when myriad dangers emerge from the shadows or spill from clubs and bars in drunken hostility onto damp flagstones glistening in the lamplight, the homeless prowl the streets in constant watchful wakefulness...”

In *Rattling the Bones* Ann Granger weaves together an evocative tale combining poverty and avarice, and an altogether original protagonist, and manages to do so with wry humour. Like each of her books, it will both inform and entertain.

Other novels in the Fran Varady series are *Asking for Trouble*, *Keeping Bad Company*, *Running Scared*, *Risking It All*, *Watching Out*, and *Mixing With Murder*.

Jim Napier can be reached at jim.napier52@gmail.com



© Jim Napier 2007