

# A whack on the wild side

## *Mystery on the links*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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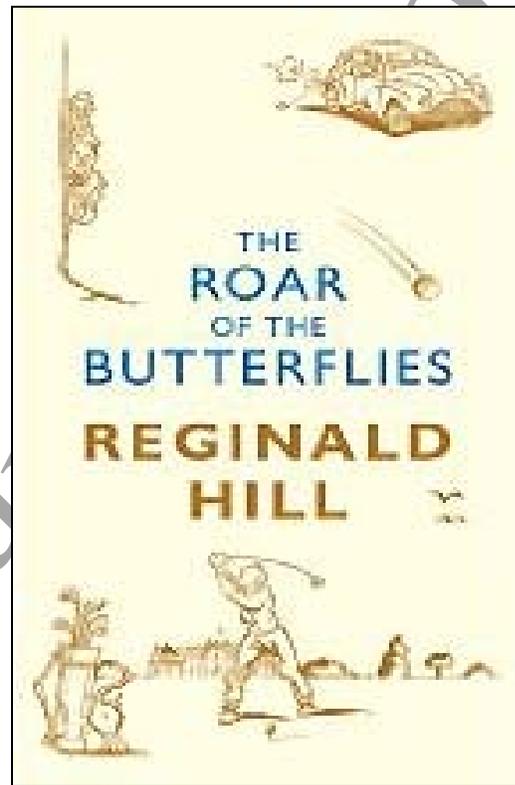
by Jim Napier

Spring, when a young man's fancy lightly turns to...golf. With apologies to Lord Tennyson (who, being well and truly buried, is in no position to argue the point), after several months of cold, unremitting gloom, who does not welcome the first glimpse of green? And where best to find it than on an, er, green?

This week's pick follows a noble tradition of setting a mystery on a golf course. From the Nancy Drew mysteries to Agatha Christie, crime writers have given us such memorable golfing tales as *A Hole in One*, *the Body in the Bunker*, *Deadly Divots*, and *Sudden Death*. Even those unfortunate souls who do not fully appreciate the subtle nuances of *The Scottish Affliction* will be drawn to the engaging protagonist PI Joe Sixsmith, and the plight of his client. I suppose it's predictable: give a man a club, and the results are bound to end in tears.

### ***Reginald Hill***

Born in Hartlepool, England in 1936, Reg Hill attended Oxford University and served as a teacher and schoolmaster until 1980, when he turned to writing full-time. For almost four decades he has been entertaining mystery fans around the world, and picking up a barrowful of awards along the way. Readers and telly addicts alike have been regaled by the exploits of the wildly impolitic



Detective Superintendent Andy Dalzeil and his long-suffering sidekick Inspector Peter Pascoe. The slightly gritty, thoroughly modern series set in Yorkshire offers a welcome antidote to the somewhat idealized view of country life popularised by Agatha Christie. *Dalzeil and Pascoe* has aired locally on both TVO and the BBC, and garnered Hill a Golden Dagger from the British-based Crime Writers Association, followed by a Diamond Dagger for his lifetime contribution to the genre. He is perhaps less well known for his series featuring

the exploits of Joe Sixsmith, a black ex-lathe-operator turned private investigator, based in the industrial town of Luton, in Bedfordshire. Hill also pens thrillers under the name of Patrick Ruell.

As befits a writer, Hill is affable, intelligent, and entertaining. He and his wife Pat live in a Victorian vicarage in Cumbria, England, together with their two Siamese cats and a Golden Lab.

***The Roar of the Butterflies***  
(Doubleday Canada, 2008)

The Royal Hoo Golf Club occupies pride of place amongst the local patricians that preside over the nearby city of Luton. On any given day its car park is filled with Aston-Martins, Rollers, Jaguars, and Range Rovers. It is not exactly home ground to black private investigator Joe Sixsmith or his aging Morris Oxford. He is not a little surprised, then, when the grandson of the club's founder seeks him out professionally. Christian Porphyry looks all the world like a male model in an upmarket catalog, clad as he is in a linen jacket and cream-coloured trousers, tanned to a degree that bespeaks old money, and possessing pale golden locks.

Yet all is not golden in Xanadu. Porphyry stands accused of cheating at golf. While the charge might be laughable at first glance, he takes it quite seriously: for if he is found guilty by the Rules Committee, Porphyry can be barred from the club his grandfather founded.

Joe is perplexed. He has difficulty understanding why this is such a world-shaking matter in the first place; and second, if Porphyry's claims of innocence are to be believed, why would someone go to such elaborate lengths to have him tossed from the club?

As an ex-lathe operator Sixsmith doesn't exactly move in the same circles, and he's not at all sure that he's best placed to get to the heart of the matter. However, with his finances in disarray and clients thin on the ground, Joe decides to set aside his prejudices and try to help his obviously-distraught client.

In order to infiltrate the club and uncover its secrets, Sixsmith, who has never played the game, masquerades as a prospective member. He soon finds himself being challenged to a game by three of the club's best golfers, the result of his less-than-perfect understanding of the term 'scratch.' His abilities to dissemble and procrastinate are sorely tested as he strives to prevent being unmasked.

As he moves uneasily among Luton's power elite, Sixsmith learns that the stakes seem to be getting higher: a young greenskeeper has disappeared. Are the two events related? Joe senses that he might be getting in over his head, but it is too late to back out. A stranger to the games being played both on and off the course, Joe will soon discover that in golf as in life, hazards are not limited to water and bunkers, a good lie is one you can get away with, and sometimes nothing is out of bounds.

***Stroke of genius,  
or par for the course?***

*The Roar of the Butterflies* will especially resonate with those who, even as we speak, are dusting off their clubs, polishing their golf shoes, and looking wistfully out the window for the errant robin. That said, it will also appeal to mystery fans who are simply in search of a good read.

Reg Hill owes much of his success to the fact that his novels are character-driven, and his characters—at least his protagonists—are invariably engaging. The juxtaposition of working-class Joe Sixsmith against the movers and shakers of local society opens up a mine of comic opportunities, and Hill exploits them for all they're worth. We are drawn to Sixsmith by his naïveté, his loyalty to his client, and his willingness to carry on in the face of obstacles that would dissuade a lesser (or more worldly) man. Hill also handles setting with the skill of a seasoned veteran. The plot itself is secondary, and the solution is obvious almost from the start; it is Joe Sixsmith's character, and his interaction with those around him, that form the heart of this novel. *The Roar of the Butterflies* is an entertaining read, light divertissement from the altogether more depressing events of the real world these days, with a grace note of cosmic justice saved for the very end.

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