

Monsters walk among us —and they look frighteningly ordinary

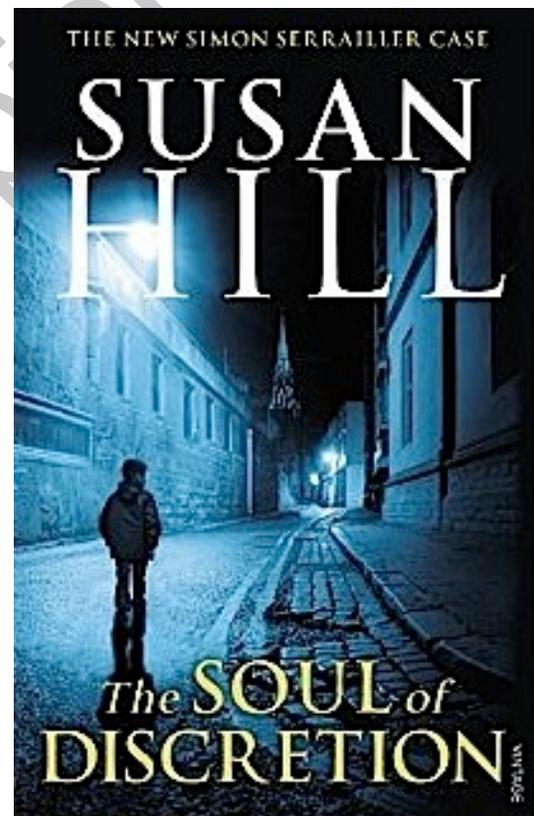
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Each year at the end of October we are treated to the spectacle of goblins and ghouls and miniature monsters on our doorsteps, some utterly charming in their erstwhile innocence, none truly frightening. If we are fortunate we put out of our minds the more terrifying images of actual monsters among us, those among us who do not go door to door one day a year seeking recognition, but who hide in the shadows, striking at random, and inflicting genuine terror on others in memories that will last a lifetime. In her latest novel award-winning author Susan Hill explores that second, more sinister world of monsters, in a tale calculated to chill her readers to the bone.

It's 2013, and in the cathedral town of Lafferton Simon Serrailier is meeting with Chief Constable Kieron Bright, a fast-tracked senior officer. Also attending are a number of officers whom Simon has never met before. After cursory introductions they get down to business, and Simon learns that he's been tapped to go deep

undercover – a risky assignment that will mean he has to sever all connections with his family for an indeterminate period of time, and which carries substantial risks. The group is tasked with solving the case of a four year old girl who was found wandering the streets at



night, physically abused and with absolutely no memory of who she was or where she had come from. It has been tied to several other

cases involving children, reaching back years, and suggesting some sort of child pornography ring. When evidence is linked to Will Fernley, the Oxford-educated son of a local aristocrat, the man is arrested, tried, and ultimately sent to prison for possession of child pornography. However, with the aid of a clever lawyer he avoids a conviction for the more serious crimes of being a party to the abuse. Now he has served five of his eight-year term, and has been transferred to a therapeutic community facility – a prison where the emphasis is on rehabilitation. Simon is being asked to go undercover at the prison, as a sex-offender himself, living as a prisoner and attending all the group therapy session in order to work his way into Fernley's confidence. The aim is to become close to Fernley, in order to discover the identity of the other pedophiles in Fernley's ring of evil. But Fernley has his own plans, and they don't involve remaining in prison for his full term.

Meanwhile, Simon's widowed sister Cat is facing her own challenges. As medical director for a local hospice she's been asked to

take on additional responsibilities, with a much-needed pay rise. Her children are rapidly approaching university age, and she needs to be able to provide for them. Her concern for her immediate family is complicated by her stepmother, Judith; Cat has watched her move from being a confident and self-assured woman to someone who is increasingly cowed and apologetic, bullied by her husband. Aware that her father Richard is abusive, she hopes he hadn't also become physically violent to her as well. But although Cat doesn't know it, the situation has moved well beyond that, and will tear at the family's already fragile relationships.

A layered plot with nuanced characters and impeccably-developed story line – vintage Susan Hill – *The Soul of Discretion* explores not only the sordid world of pedophilia, but also the changing domestic relationships as people age and their personalities change, not always for the better. Revealing, evocative, well-paced, and insightful, Hill's latest book further cements her reputation as a novelist of the first order.

§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*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

First published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, November 2015