

Plus ça change...

Novelist explores the gender war in police work

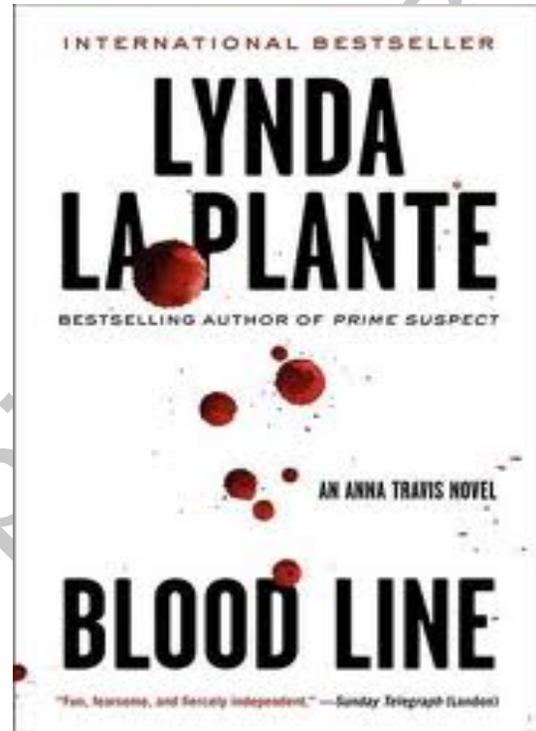
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

When Lynda La Plante's *Prime Suspect* television series first appeared in 1991, starring Helen Mirren as the vulnerable but tough-minded Inspector Jane Tennison, it forever changed the face of crime fiction. For the first time here was a strong female character *in a position of power*, resented by most of her male co-workers, and seemingly constantly at odds with (and standing up to) her superior officers, not coincidentally men as well. This at a time when in real life there were but three women police detectives in Britain serving at the rank of Inspector or above.

Over twenty years have passed, and the policing scene has dramatically changed, both in real life and in the pages of crime fiction. There is today no shortage of female detectives at senior ranks; often they find themselves still fighting in a working world dominated by men, and holding their own, thank you very much, and both readers and writers are the better for it. *Blood Line* explores one of the best of the new breed of female detectives, who, like her predecessors, fight to retain control of their work while facing formidable challenges in their personal lives.

DCI Anna Travis is having an uneventful day until she is approached



by Edward Rawlins, a courtroom usher she knows from her work at the Old Bailey. It seems his twenty-six-year-old son, Alan, has not been heard from in two weeks. Not long, to be sure, but a serious change of behaviour, as Alan was in the habit of visiting his Alzheimer's-stricken mother and doting father at least twice a week. Because his absence is so out of character, Alan's father fears he has been murdered.

Anna is disinclined to take the man's concerns seriously until she speaks with Tina Brooks, Alan's girlfriend

and live-in lover, a local hairdresser who says she hasn't seen him in eight weeks. Anna learns that the two have £70,000 in a joint bank account that they were saving for the down payment on a house; the money is un-touched. When Anna speaks with Alan's employer she learns that the auto mechanic left work suddenly one day, claiming a sudden migraine attack. Tina picked him up at work, and he hadn't been seen since. Eight weeks on a valuable vintage Mercedes that he was restoring sits unclaimed in one of the service bays.

Anna is suspicious, but she is fighting battles on two fronts. A paternalistic senior officer, Chief Superintendent James Langton, is inclined to see the case as one that might go beyond Anna's abilities. Anna's fiancé, a prison guard had been recently killed by a prisoner obsessed with Anna, and she is still grieving. Langton constantly looks over Anna's shoulder, second-guessing her actions, and their relationship is not helped by the fact that years ago she and Langton had been lovers.

When a neighbour reports seeing Tina with several large bottles of bleach near the time of Alan's disappearance, Anna and her partner DS Paul Simms decide to search the flat.

Before long they make a disturbing discovery: a piece of carpet has been cut out from underneath the living room sofa. Tina explains that Alan spilled some red wine there, and when he couldn't remove the stain, Tina ordered a new carpet to avoid forfeiting their damage deposit on the flat. They also notice that Tina has bagged all of Alan's clothes to give away; hardly the actions of a loving fiancée.

A further search of the premises reveals a square of carpet under the bed. When it is lifted, there are ominous stains and the strong odor of bleach. Anna calls in the forensics team, and Tina is taken to the station for questioning.

At this point most readers will think they've got this one wrapped up: perp, motive, and opportunity are obvious — right? They should think again: Lynda La Plante is a seasoned novelist, and it shows. Building on believable characters, compelling dialogue, and meticulous attention to detail, La Plante's layered plotting provides the basis for an original tale that will keep readers guessing until the final pages. *Blood Line* is firmly in the tradition of La Plante's groundbreaking *Prime Suspect* series, and will satisfy her many fans.