

Scandanavian Noir moves west

A puzzle tale for the ages

Suspended Sentences

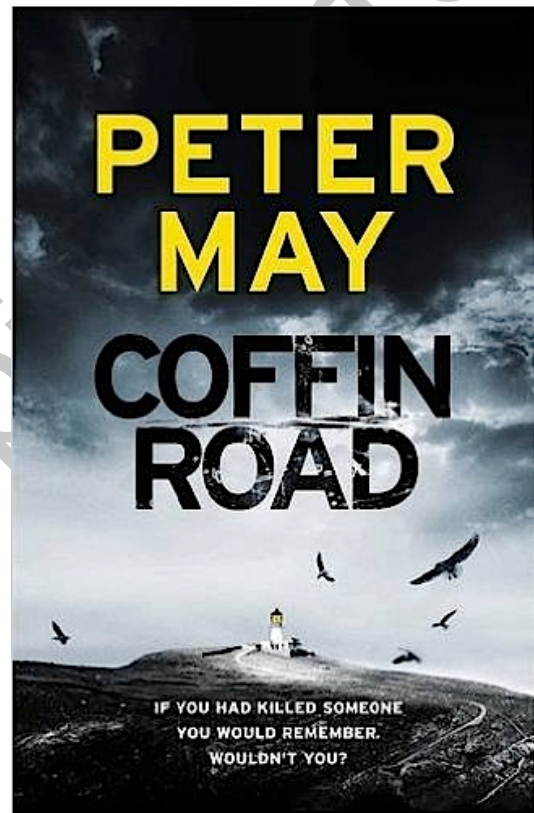
by Jim Napier

With two dozen fine novels to his credit, Peter May has established himself as one of Scotland's pre-eminent writer of the past twenty years. Some of his latest works build on the bleak and primal landscape of the Hebrides to reveal dark tales about damaged people that often reach far back into his protagonist's lives. The *Lewis Trilogy*, and his most recent novel, *Coffin Road*, are firmly grounded in that tradition.

The tale begins when a middle-aged man washes ashore on the Isle of Harris, exhausted and near death. He has no recollection of how he came to be there. Even more remarkably, he does not even know who he is.

He notices someone in the distance watching him, however, apparently unconcerned with his plight. His first clue as to his identity comes when an elderly woman encounters him on the rocky beach, and addresses him as Mr. Maclean. She helps him to his cottage nearby, where a dog bounds out to meet him, and he calls to it by name, even though he

has no memory of encountering it before now.



The man showers, changes his clothes, serendipitously finds a bottle of single malt, and takes stock of his surroundings. Some papers on a kitchen table, including a bill addressed to Neil Maclean. Some books on a shelf, not particularly enlightening. A map on the wall of the Outer Hebrides, which he can see from

his cottage. And curiously, a laptop computer with absolutely nothing on it. Looking out the window he sees a reflection in the distance, and realizes it is the same man who was watching him earlier, with his binoculars still fixed on his cottage.

Exhausted, the man who now knows himself as Neil Maclean falls asleep on the bed, his bed. He awakens to the sound of someone entering his home and calling out his name. He hollers out and reaches for his clothing. When he enters the main room he finds a couple, perhaps in their late twenties, waiting for him. By their accents not from the island, and well-educated. He has no idea who they are. Later the woman returns alone to the cottage, and makes love to Maclean. It is not the first time, he realises, but he has no idea who she is.

Told using multiple points of view and evocative natural settings, Peter May's exquisitely-layered novels bridge the gap between Scandinavian Noir and traditional British crime dramas, drawing on the barren landscape of the Scottish Islands for their power, yet

fashioning original narratives that are very much of our time and place.



Author Peter May

Coffin Road would be a captivating tale if its plot revolved only around the story as explained so far, and it was allowed to spin itself out to its conclusion. But there are uncharted depths here, involving subplots and enigmas galore, to beguile the reader into pressing on. Neil finds a pamphlet describing the fate of three lighthouse keepers on a small nearby island, and their sudden disappearance on the same night over a century earlier. Echoes of the *Marie Celeste*. And we are introduced to a disturbed young woman in present-day Edinburgh, searching for her father, and refusing to accept that two years earlier he had committed suicide. Not least, there is a significant social theme at work here, a theme that calls into question mankind's tenuous relationship with nature.

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Since 2005 more than 500 of Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on such websites as *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, *Crime Time*, *Reviewing The Evidence*, *January* magazine, the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning crime fiction site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime

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