

Out of the Depths

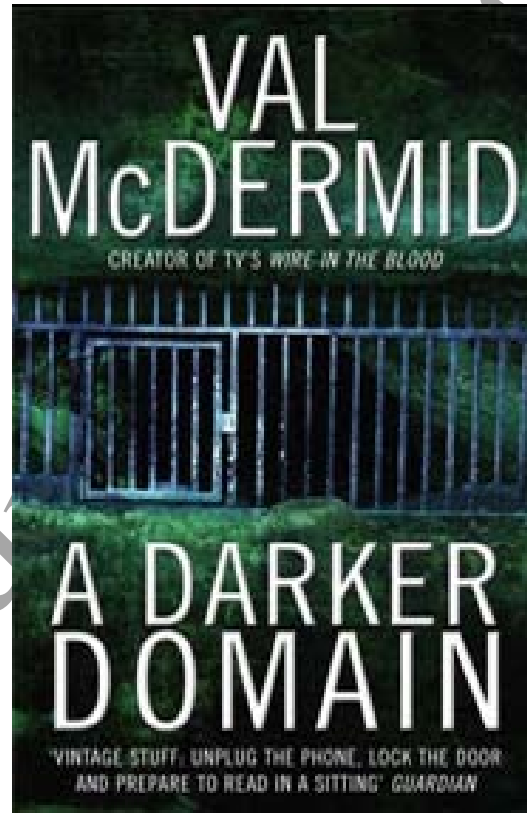
Thriller builds on Britain's troubled past

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

One of the enjoyable things about contemporary crime fiction is the increasing complexity of current story lines. In its earliest incarnations crime fiction was essentially linear: there was one main plot, or sequence of events, and those events were related chronologically, with a single cast of characters. There might be an occasional flashback or more often, an event that had occurred outside the framework of the narrative, but by and large the story line proceeded in a straightforward (and sometimes less-than-challenging) fashion.

Not so today. Contemporary crime writers are free to explore multiple plot lines, occurring simultaneously or in different eras, within the framework of a single story. The tales can be woven around characters who know one another, or who share similar circumstances, or even people who have no apparent connection with one another. They can follow parallel tracks, diverge, or converge at key dramatic points. A layered structure is also an excellent way to intertwine fact with fiction, to lend credibility to a story. This week's pick does both, and very well. The result is a far more varied, and to my mind more interesting, fare for readers.



Val McDermid

Over the past two decades Val McDermid has risen to the top rank of British crime writers. She has penned more than twenty novels, including those that form the basis for the groundbreaking TV series, *Wire in the Blood*, which follows the exploits of criminal profiler Dr. Tony Hill. Along the way she has garnered almost every crime-writing award in the book, including the Sherlock Award and the Barry Award for Best Crime Novel of the Year (*The Distant Echo*), A New York Times pick

as Notable Book of the Year (*Killing the Shadows*), and the Los Angeles Book Prize (*A Place of Execution*). She has also won the Portico Prize for Fiction (*The Grave Tattoo*) and has twice won the Theakston Old Peculiar Crime Novel of the Year (*The Grave Tattoo* and *The Torment of Others*). She lives in the north of England.

In this, her most ambitious effort to date, McDermid travels back in time to deliver not one, but two tales filled with greed, guilt, ambition, and loss.

A Darker Domain
(HarperCollins, 2008)

The year is 1984. Margaret Thatcher is Prime Minister, the Tories rule with an iron grip, and Britain is beset by a national strike of coal miners. At the height of the conflict, just as most worker's families are struggling to survive, Scottish miner Mick Prentice suddenly disappears. It is assumed that like others, he broke ranks with his fellow workers to go south in search of a job, a theory supported by the fact that his wife Jennie begins to receive regular payments in the post for herself and their young daughter, Michelle. Hardly surprising to Mick's detractors: after all, his own father had been a scab in the miner's strike of 1926.

Two decades on, Mick's daughter approaches Detective Inspector Karen Pirie of the Cold Case Review Team. She believes her father might still be alive, and finding him is a matter of some urgency: her son Luke is dying from a rare blood disease, and her father is one of a very few people who can save his life.

But Fate moves in mysterious ways. Within days of Karen's first meeting with Prentice's daughter, an Edinburgh

journalist, Bel Richmond, arranges a meeting of her own with Sir Broderick MacLennan Grant, one of Scotland's wealthiest business magnates. Over two decades ago, during the very same strike, his daughter Cat and six-month-old grandson had been kidnapped by an anarchist group. The payoff had gone terribly wrong; his daughter had been killed, and his grandson never found. Now Bel has un-covered, quite by accident, an old wanted poster from the kidnapping whilst vacationing in Tuscany. She wants badly to pursue the case, but Sir Broderick is initially reluctant to reopen his life to public scrutiny on the strength of such a tenuous lead. Realising that this story could be the making of her journalistic career, Bel agrees to hold off making it public until the case is solved and she can produce a book, or at the very least, a series of articles. Seduced by the thought of reuniting with his grandson, Sir Broderick agrees to hire Bel to pursue the case. For each, it will prove to be a pact with the devil.

Some members of Karen's team are understandably reluctant to revisit the case: they had been involved in the botched ransom transfer that had resulted in Cat's death. But given his position, Sir Broderick's request is more like an imperial order. The trouble with stirring up the past, however, is that everyone has something to hide, and before it is over Sir Broderick MacLennan Grant will have cause to regret his decision.

Not one tale, but two

A Darker Domain is an intricately-crafted tale that showcases McDermid's considerable literary talents. Herself a former journalist and the granddaughter of Scottish coal miners, McDermid skill-

fully draws on her personal background to weave a compelling portrayal of that rich landscape and those troubled times. A complex and multi-layered story, full of plot twists and red herrings, it would be all too easy to lose her readers as she shifts back and forth amongst the past and present, and from the bleak mining villages of Scotland to the idyllic landscapes of rural Italy. But her saga is seamlessly told, and holds the reader from beginning to end. She even finds time for some biting social commentary, focusing on the contrast between the mean streets of strike-bound villages and their gentrification, decades later, to cater to the suburban needs of white-collar commuters. Val McDermid is a highly accomplished author, and the *Literary Review* has called *A Darker Domain* “one of her best yet.” They are not wrong.

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



© Jim Napier 2009