

A fine, flawless novel

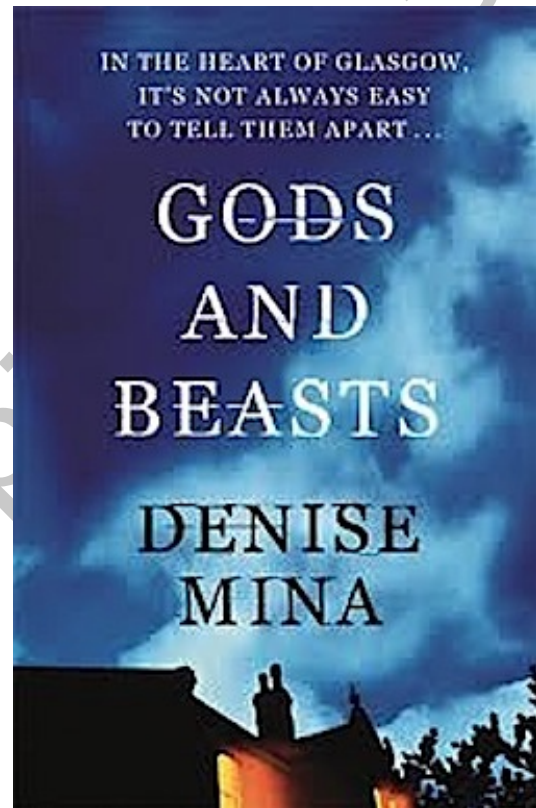
Denise Mina's latest a superb tale

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

OF THE HUNDREDS OF NOVELS I receive each year, I always look forward to the newest Denise Mina. Her writing is consistently fresh and compelling, and nobody wraps an important social theme around a challenging and topical plot line better than she does. Her latest effort, *Gods and Beasts*, will not disappoint her many fans.

THE TALE BEGINS in a small post office in Glasgow. An elderly man is standing in line with his four-year-old grandson, waiting to mail a parcel, when a masked gunman bursts in, waves an AK-47 pistol about, and orders the customers to lie on the floor. When the gunman picks the grandfather out, the old man hands the boy to a stranger, Martin Pavel, saying only "He's yours." Then he turns to help the gunman by holding a canvas bag open for him. When the robber has finished filling it with cash he turns his gun on the old man and shoots him—not once but ten times, nearly cutting the man in half as round after round exits his now-lifeless body. Then, with glass and blood and chaos in his wake, the gunman disappears, leaving the boy gripping Martin in terror, until the police arrive.



The case falls on DS Alex Morrow and her partner, DC Harris, to solve. Beyond the confused accounts of the terrified witnesses and the lifeless body of the old man, they have little to go on. Not least among their challenges, Martin Pavel—the man given the boy—is not at all what he seems to be.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg, for across town at nearly the same time two other officers, DC Tamsin Leonard and her partner Wilder are on the edge of the city about to end their shift when they get a call to keep an eye out for an Audi G7. Known to be the vehicle of choice for local drug dealers, the owner is wanted in connection with an ongoing investigation.

FOR VERY DIFFERENT REASONS, both officers have been marginalized from their peers: Wilder because he is simply offensive, Leonard because she is gay. They'd been paired simply to spare other officers from having to deal with them. They both know it, and tolerate each other as the lesser of the various evils they put up with on a daily basis.

Before long they spot the Audi, and light it up. Surprisingly the driver pulls over and when questioned, seems largely unconcerned about being stopped. Something about his smugness alerts them, and Wilder asks him to open the rear hatch, revealing a panel in the floor. Underneath it they discover a large IKEA bag full of cash, all in twenty-pound notes. For the two officers it's decision time: take the driver in and log the loot, or keep it for themselves and cut him loose. The choice will have consequences that ripple throughout the rest of their lives.

But two plot lines are seldom enough for the complex mind of Denise Mina, and in the more rarefied atmosphere of party politics, across town local MP Kenny Gallagher is facing demons of

his own: he's just been accused of having an affair with a junior member of his staff—an allegation that could spell the end of both his career and his troubled marriage. Adding fuel to an already considerable fire, a local gangster, Danny McGrath, has offered to help Kenny with his problem, and just to make matters worse, Danny is DS Morrow's half-brother. Yet another opportunity for corruption to prevail.

As I noted at the outset, one of the many strengths of Denise Mina's novels is that they address some of the most important social issues that underlie contemporary life. This stems from Mina's background as a graduate student in law, and her realization that she could reach many more people through writing intelligent, thoughtful crime fiction about the very same issues that preoccupied her as an academic. From her first novel in 1998, *Garnethill*—which earned her the John Creasey Award for Best First Crime Fiction—each of her books focuses on some key aspect of law and morality, and the reader comes away not only with a satisfying read, but also with an increased awareness of the contours of major moral issues facing society today. *Gods and Beasts* is the bleak narrative of a policing system that values paper-pushing administration over the efforts of front-line officers on streets dominated by savvy criminals who know how to exploit the policing system to shape public perceptions, and it is eloquent in its condemnation of a social system on the verge of collapse, a political system that

imposes urban blight on the powerless while serving the desires of craven politicians, and a social system that goes through the motions of caring about those on the margins, but which is incapable of responding to their actual needs. Mina's tale takes its name from a passage in Aristotle, in which the philosopher states the central tension confronting civilized society regardless of time or place: "Those who live outside the city walls, and are self-sufficient, are either Gods or Beasts." The recurring question of Mina's novel is, which

will prevail? And the ending is provocative, to say the least.

ALL THE SUPERLATIVES that one could wish for in a crime novel—literate writing, a strong sense of setting, nuanced characters, layered plotting that threads its way through the characters' personal and professional lives, and a theme that resonates with readers—are present in *Gods and Beasts*. It is a fine, flawless novel. Every page is fresh and compelling, and will leave readers eagerly awaiting her next work.

Originally published on *January Magazine*, March 06, 2013.

Since 2005 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*, and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com