

Best Laid Plans

Rankin's latest reveals another side

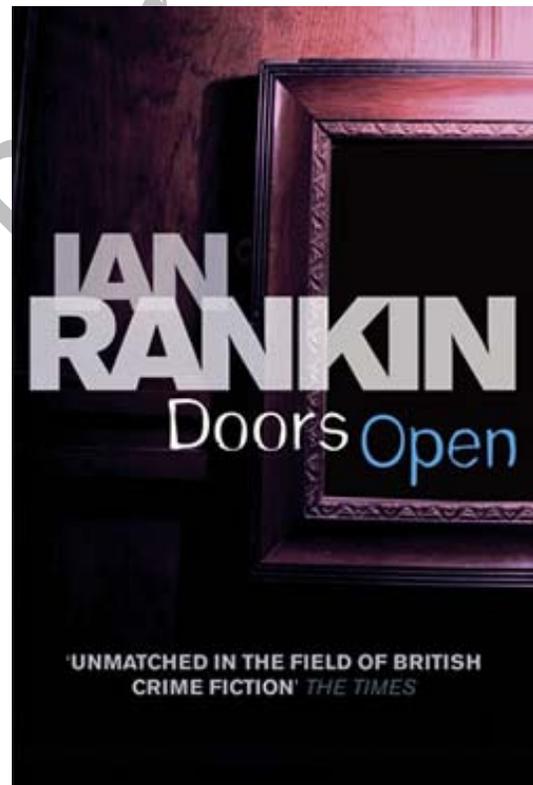
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Most crime fiction is told from the point of view of the crimefighter, be he or she a cop, a PI, or an amateur sleuth. The puzzle lies in figuring out whodunnit, or how the crime was committed. This week's pick is a change of pace, a crime caper, termed an "inverted mystery" in the trade. The story is told from the perspective of the "perp" (or perpetrator, to you and me). We know from the outset who the villain is, and his plan; the only question is, what will happen? Will he get away with it? If not, how will he be undone?

The inverted mystery has a long tradition especially on the big screen; recent caper films include George Clooney's *Ocean's Eleven*, and *Entrapment*, with Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Classic capers include *To Catch a Thief*, which starred Cary Grant and Grace Kelly, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, by far the best version starring Steve McQueen, and *Topkapi*, featuring the inimitable Peter Ustinov. And many readers will recall the long-running TV series, *Columbo*, with Peter Falk as a disarmingly eccentric and somewhat ruffled police detective who despite his apparent dimness always got his man. The charm of such plots often lies in the character of the

culprit: a likeable chap, usually motivated by something other than mere greed, we actually want to see him to get away with it. And as the net closes, the suspense builds. At the hands of a gifted writer, it is the perfect formula for a winning story. This week's pick is just such a tale.



Ian Rankin

He is by now something of a Scottish institution. He invented the genre known as *Tartan Noir*, characterized by dark, atmospheric crime tales set among the mean streets of

Edinburgh; and although Ian Rankin has spawned a generation of imitators, in the words of the Bond song, nobody does it better. For several years he has remained the UK's number one best-selling crime writer, having won two Crime Writers' Association (CWA) Dagger prizes for short stories and the CWA Macallan Gold Dagger for Fiction for 1997's *Black and Blue*. In 2004 Ian won the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for *Resurrection Men*; and the following year he was awarded the CWA Cartier Diamond Dagger to mark a lifetime of excellence in crime writing. In 2008 he won the ITV3 Crime Thriller Award for Author of the Year, for his final Rebus novel, *Exit Music*. With honorary doctorates from no less than four British universities, in June of 2002 Ian was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for his services to literature.

Last year, much to the dismay of readers around the world, Ian retired DI John Rebus, the troubled but likeable antihero of no less than eighteen brilliant novels. Fans lamented as he promised to take his writing in new directions. What could possibly best his previous work? A year on he has answered that question with his latest book.

Doors Open
(Orion Books, 2008)

Like the Rebus stories, *Doors Open* is set in Edinburgh, in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle. The protagonist, Mike Mackenzie, is a basically likeable, thirty-seven-year old retired dot-com multimillionaire. In material terms he is successful beyond

most peoples' wildest dreams: considered the city's most eligible bachelor, he has a posh flat filled with art, overlooking the Burns Memorial, and a Maserati sports car. He lacks for nothing.

But Mike is bored. Ever since selling his business outright, Mike has been searching for some way to challenge his formidable organizational skills. Now, having recently begun to seriously collect art, he thinks he may have found it. When an acquaintance casually mentions that not only has he figured out how to loot the National Gallery of Scotland of some of its prized possessions, but to do so in a way that ensures the theft will never be discovered, Mike is intrigued. Its collection includes one painting that Mike desperately wants, but knows will never come on the market. The more he thinks about it, the more Mike sees this as a challenge. As the scheme takes shape Mike is joined by a gullible friend, a manipulative art expert, a simpering art student and his greedy girlfriend, and a local crime boss with the necessary resources. And although Mike doesn't know it, there is a joker in the deck: a brutal psychopath with only one thing on his mind.

A car crash in slow motion

A fellow Scot, Robert Burns, said it first: "the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley"; and Mike Mackenzie's plan to pull off the heist of the century is, we suspect, doomed to failure. Not unlike witnessing a car crash in slow motion, we watch with horror as Mike finds himself getting in over his head, turning for help to an Edinburgh crime figure

who has his own problems. And when the whole thing starts to go pear-shaped we hope against hope that somehow Mike will escape from the worst of the mess. But of course it only gets worse:

'I'm going to kill you all,' the man spat, face smeared with his own blood. Mike Mackenzie didn't doubt him for a second. What else was someone called Hate going to do? Mike was staring at the door reminded that this chair of events had begun – so innocently – with a party and with friends.

And with greed.

And desire.

But above all, with doors opening and closing.

With *Doors Open* Ian Rankin has demonstrated that he can write from the other side of the street as well, showing us what crime looks like from the perspective of the criminal. A well-researched foray into the elite world of auction houses and art galleries, it contains a riveting plot with a devilish twist at the end, told with the consummate skill that readers have come to expect from this accomplished author. It is a cautionary tale as well, warning us that big dreams carry big risks, and ambition may be only a step away from disaster. Revolving around a protagonist who is, at his core, everyman, *Doors Open* is a contemporary story of hubris and its consequences. The Greeks would have been pleased.

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