

Best of British Noir

Suspended Sentences

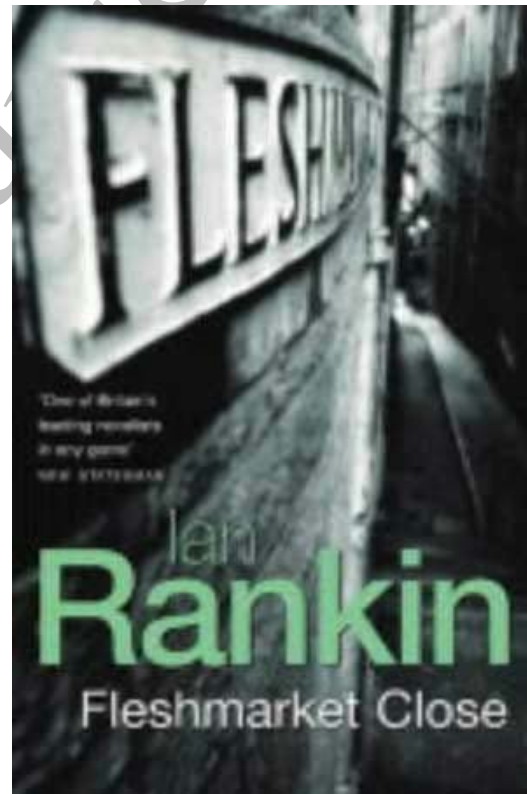
by Jim Napier

For many readers, this week's pick will be a change of pace. A contemporary tale with vestiges of 1940's crime fiction popularized by the likes of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett – but set against the city of Edinburgh Scotland, in a genre known as *Scottish* (or *Tartan*) *Noir*. Noir is about alienated people trying to function in a dysfunctional society: some are villains, more are victims, and even the heroes are flawed. Justice, if it happens at all, tends to be of the cosmic variety, the legal system often falling short. As you might expect, there is a liberal dose of cynicism, leavened by a dark humour. *The Wizard of Oz* it ain't, but in the hands of a master, noir crime fiction makes for compelling reading.

Ian Rankin

In a twentieth-century version of the Renaissance Man, Ian Rankin has been, by turns, a grape-picker, a swineherd, an alcohol researcher, a taxman, and a punk musician. Fortunately for mystery readers he turned to crime writing. It's now been almost twenty years since Ian Rankin burst on the crime fiction scene with his first Inspector Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses*; since then he's gone on to win an Edgar (the Mystery Writers of America award) for Best novel of the Year (*Resurrection Men*), two Daggers (the British Crime Writer's Association award) for short stories, a Gold Dagger for best crime novel of the year (*Black and Blue*), and a Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement in crime writing.

He is the only author who has had seven novels among the top ten best-sellers in Scotland at the same time! His books have been published in twenty-two languages, and he is currently the UK's best-selling crime writer world-wide. In 2002 Ian was awarded an OBE for his services to British literature (this from a man who has just turned forty-five). He and his wife Miranda and their two sons split their time between homes in Edinburgh and France.



Fleshmarket Close (Orion Books, 2004)

Rankin is notorious for devising multi-layered plots, weaving together several

mysteries at a time with contemporary social issues. His stories have involved serial killers, ex-Nazis in hiding, and turf wars between rival criminal gangs; in between he has not neglected the worlds of cops gone bad, school shootings, and internet predators. His fifteenth Rebus novel, *Fleshmarket Close* is no exception. Detective Inspector John Rebus is called to the scene of a homicide: a man is found in a passageway on a public-housing estate; he has been stabbed multiple times. Before Rebus can even begin to unravel this case, two skeletons are unearthed during renovations to the basement of a local pub. Meanwhile his assistant, Detective Sergeant Siobhan Clarke, has been asked by the parents of a dead girl to find their other daughter, who has disappeared. She feels a special obligation, as the dead sister had been raped, and committed suicide soon afterwards.

Rebus's investigation leads him into the shadowy world of immigrants and asylum-seekers, some legal and others not, who have been caught between modern-day slave-traders and a callous bureaucracy. Just as surely Siobhan's quest for the missing girl leads to another sort of slavery: a world of lap-dancers who cannot turn to the law for help. All of these stories come together in an intricate and ingeniously plotted tale that manages to combine a perfectly believable chain of events with surprises on every page.

***The finest living crime writer,
bar none***

Ian Rankin is one of the freshest voices to surface in crime fiction in a very long time. His eye for setting and his ear for dialogue are uncanny. These are real people: cops wearied by their jobs, but unwilling to be ground down; petty

villains striving to stay a step ahead of the law and their rivals; victims trying desperately to steer their way between an exploitive underclass and the authorities, whom they fear will send them back to an even more appalling world. It would be very easy for a writer of such themes to revert to the comfortable world of clichés; but Rankin manages flawlessly to avoid this, every page sounding an original note, carrying the reader effortlessly and enjoyably toward the conclusion. To my mind Ian Rankin is the finest living crime writer bar none; and his huge sales and distinguished awards suggest that many others share my view.

If you like this book...

By all means read the other Inspector Rebus novels. The characters do evolve, however, so begin with his first, *Knots and Crosses*. I'll be very surprised if you're not hooked.

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