

Tour de Force

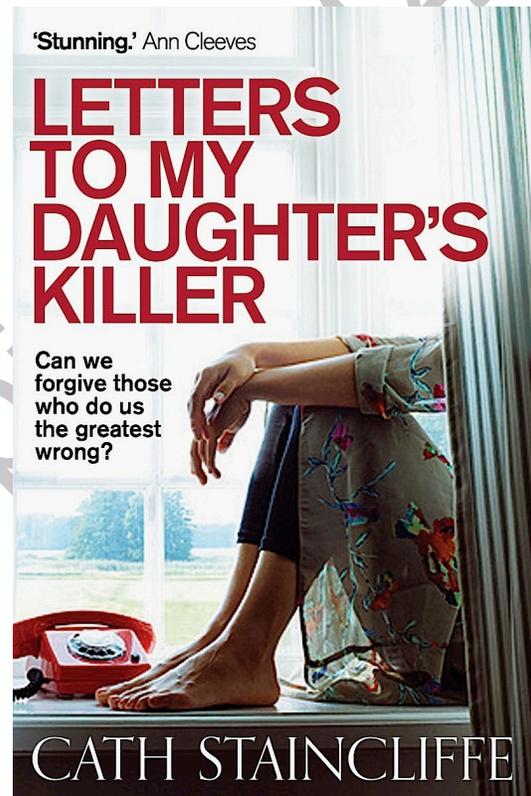
Cath Staincliffe's latest a masterpiece

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

British crime writer Cath Staincliffe is perhaps best known for her book-and-television series, *Blue Murder*, and for the Scott and Bailey police procedurals, commissioned after the television series by the same name. But as good as both of those series are, it is in her standalone novels that Staincliffe's exceptional talent most clearly shines. Her signature approach is to narrate a story through the eyes of a victim, or the perpetrator, or even a witness, and by so doing to provide a fresh point of view with an immediacy that absolutely challenges the reader to put her books down. The result is a collection of nuanced tales that are original and compelling and as enjoyable as anything out there written by anyone today.

Now, her most recent standalone, *Letters to My Daughter's Killer* has been released in Britain, and, in the words of her fellow author Ann Cleeves (no mean wordsmith herself), it is, quite simply, stunning.



The tale opens with three words of brutal intensity: "I hate you," the narrator says. And with good reason, for she has experienced every mother's worst nightmare: Ruth Sutton's grown daughter Lizzie has been killed – in fact, brutally murdered. We witness Ruth's hatred festering and growing until she is compelled to write a series of letters to her

daughter's killer, trying to comprehend the puzzle behind her grief. Why did her daughter have to die? What chain of events was so inexorable that her daughter's death was the only possible outcome? Compounding the tragedy is Ruth's young granddaughter's understandable confusion about where mummy went, and why she is never coming back.

The events unfold through the backstory, Ruth dredging up the often dreary milestones that marked her own daily life, including her own failed marriage, starkly juxtaposed against the sudden impact of her daughter's death in the hallway of her very own home. As the police work through the possibilities, Ruth must come to terms with the uncertainties of modern life. Was it a prowler? A random stranger? Several months earlier Lizzie had been the object of a stalker who cannot now be located, but when events take an unexpected turn Ruth feels the world slipping out from under her.

STAINCLIFFE'S PROBING EXAMINATION of the corrosive effects of hatred reveals just how far a destructive emotion can take us, from an understandable grief to an all-consuming obsession that shapes our very perceptions of a situation. But this is not simply a psychoanalytic dissection of a mothers' grief, for there is a twist in the tale that elevates this story to the first rank of psychological thrillers. Intense, heart-wrenching, at times a profoundly sad but insightful book, *Letters to My Daughter's Killer* resolutely explores the complex themes of vengeance, justice, understanding, and acceptance.

There is something for everyone here, then, and particularly for those who would try to understand the complexities of real life. In a genre all too often dominated by the banal and the predictable, *Letters to My Daughter's Killer* is a genuine tour de force. Once again Cath Staincliffe has shown herself to be a highly original and skilled writer, pushing the boundaries of crime fiction and taking her craft in an entirely new direction.

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Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January magazine*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine* the *Montreal Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, <http://deadlydiversions.com/> He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com