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MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2010

Mina's Lighter Side

(Editor's note: In association with the new American publication of Still Midnight, Denise Mina's eighth novel, [Jim Napier](#), a mystery and crime fiction critic living in Quebec, Canada, has sent us the following profile of the author. This piece appeared originally in the Quebec daily newspaper, the Sherbrooke Record.)

I approached my interview with Scottish crime writer [Denise Mina](#) with the same trepidation and dread I usually reserve for visits to my dentist or tax accountant. After all, the rumor was that she used to screen her first dates by subjecting them to slasher films such as [The Texas Chainsaw Massacre](#) to determine whether they were really compatible! And Mina's novels, infused with a strong sense of justice gone awry, and set against the bleak desolation of Glasgow, are no less dark.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered that Denise Mina is not at all like her books. She is an open, engaging person with a strong



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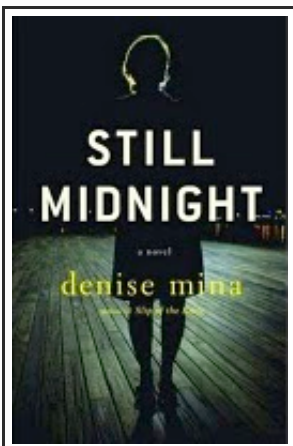
[Mark Coggins](#)

sense of humor, petite, and with a haircut that reminds you of Peter Pan--if you add to the mix a bit of Darth Vader. We got together last June at Bloody Words, the annual Canadian crime-writing festival, where she was--not coincidentally--the International Guest of Honor. Managing to snare an out-of-the-way corner where we could chat, I began by asking Mina about her unusual technique for screening dates. Flashing a mischievous smile, she acknowledged that her favorite movie is [The Exorcist](#). Her only surprise, she said, was learning that not everyone shared her taste.

Noting that she wrote her very first novel, [Garnethill](#), while she was still a university student, I asked Mina whether her success--that book went on to win the John Creasey Award for Best First Crime Novel of 1998--motivated her to end her university studies in law and turn to writing full-time. "I was astonished," she admitted. "I only wrote it to exorcise the dream of being a writer from my head, and then it got published. I was looking forward to a very grim future as an academic, I'm afraid. I took on too much admin and had no confidence in my own research--which is essential. My academic supervisor was thrilled for me when I got published and gave up. He's a good guy and still a friend."

Mina's novels--including the brand-new U.S. release, [Still Midnight](#)--often go well beyond the conventional legal resolution of conflicts, to raise complex moral questions about what is right or just. When I asked her what that tells us about her view of the law and how it functions, she said, "It's a very old-fashioned thing to want to develop the ability to question and examine issues of morality, but I think I benefited from not being taught that way in the sense that I strove to think about these things myself. The law is a social construct and I don't see it as a separate entity from how society

works." Apparently, that thinking strikes a chord with readers, for her books regularly find spots at the top of the bestseller lists in British crime fiction.



One of the most compelling things about Mina's fiction is her intense portrayal of flawed and conflicted personalities. I asked her how she managed to get into the skin of such characters, whether she deliberately sought out such people, and to what extent she based her portrayals on

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real individuals. Her response was insightful, in itself a commentary on our times: “They are based on the people around me. I know all of these people, the gangsters, the damaged, the struggling. I think we all do. For example, one in four people will suffer from a mental illness at some point in our lives, so I don’t really need to go to [a] day care center to meet people with mental health issues.”

A chilling thought, and I followed it up with a question about the protagonist featured in her most recent novels, investigative reporter Paddy Meehan. “Paddy is a diffident, yet driven woman,” I said, “struggling to transcend her own background and resolve her own issues. How much of Paddy is in you?” Mina paused for a moment and her reply was typically perceptive. “Well, you know, my generation was the first to go to university and I think we all feel an educational chasm between ourselves and our parents, who struggled for us to have that right. To a certain extent everyone tries to transcend their background, which is heartbreaking only when you become a parent and realize with a start [that] I am the future problem you’ll be pushing against.”

I looked around and saw that others were waiting to speak with Mina. Our time was drawing to an end, but I had to ask her one more question. “Crime fiction--especially ‘Tartan Noir’--has become much edgier and darker in recent years,” I began. “Where do you think it’s headed in the future, and where would *you* like to take it?”

Her response was immediate and, for those who know her work, predictable: “I’d like to take it to a new place, a darker place, a more authentic place where plot and characterization seem self-evidently true and the plot mechanisms are better hidden.” She flashed her Peter Pan grin. “Wish me luck!”

Mina’s latest work, *Still Midnight*, is about the kidnapping of an elderly man from a middle-class suburb, with the kidnappers demanding a king’s ransom for his safe return. But the hapless hoodlums seem to have targeted the wrong house: their victim is a first-generation immigrant to Britain, an elderly Asian who runs a small corner store. Detective Sergeant Alex Morrow gets landed with the case, and worse, is paired with Grant Bannerman, a career-oriented officer she has reason to loathe. No one in the missing man’s family can--or will--shed any light on why their father has

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been taken, but Morrow has her suspicions, and while sparring with Bannerman, she vows to dig beneath the surface of the secretive family and discover their hidden secrets.

Mina combines gritty, street-level realism in these pages with graphic, explicit language and a raw, cynical take on the world. Evocative but unsentimental, *Still Midnight* is a literary novel, raising themes of fear, guilt, shame, and personal integrity; it is also simply a cracking good tale, compelling, layered and nuanced, fast-paced and utterly believable.

LABELS: [DENISE MINA](#)

POSTED BY J. KINGSTON PIERCE AT [3:02 PM](#) [0 COMMENTS](#) 

Bullet Points: Daylight Savings Time Edition

- **You can now vote in Round Two** of blogger Jen Forbus' "World's Favorite Detective" tournament. There are a few uncomfortable pairings among the 16 on offer (how does one choose between Philip Marlowe and Travis McGee, for instance, or Tom Thorne and Alan Banks?), but decisions must be made. [Cast your ballots here](#).
- **The latest short-story in *Beat to a Pulp*** comes from Pennsylvania woodworker Joshua Andra. His yarn is called "[My Best Pal](#)."
- **Hamilton Burger, how could you?** Larry Harnish, author of the *Los Angeles Times*' excellent history blog, The Daily Mirror, takes us back to 1960 and *Perry Mason* actor [William Tallman's arrest](#) at a nude pot party in West Hollywood.
- **[Here's a book cover](#) that will instill fear** in the hearts of all those narrow-minded, right-wing American Christianists.
- **Other than [a brief mention last year](#)** in Mystery*File, I don't think I had heard anything about writer [Cleve F. Adams](#) until blogger Evan Lewis started writing about his literary output in Davy Crockett's Almanack. After first [recommending Adams' *Sabotage*](#) as a "forgotten book" worth reading, Lewis has now posted [a complete Adams novelette, "Jigsaw,"](#) which first appeared in the June 11, 1938, edition of *Detective Fiction Weekly*. More on Adams' series protagonists can be found [here](#).

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