

May the farce be with you

Irish crime novelist lampoons the art world

Suspended Sentences

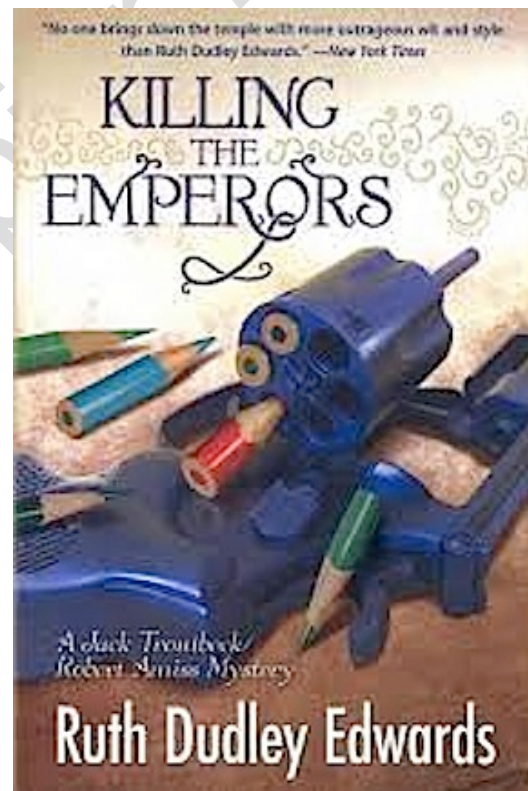
by Jim Napier

The timeless children's fable about the emperor who wore no clothes, with its warning about the dangers of vanity and of being duped by self-appointed experts, is well known. Now, in a version that will appeal to adults (and perhaps their precocious offspring), Irish crime writer Ruth Dudley Edwards delivers a tale infinitely more amusing than the original, and perfectly suited to our times. Some of the leading lights of the London art scene are being kidnapped, and that redoubtable figure of English Academia, Baroness "Jack" Troutbeck, member of the House of Lords and Mistress of St. Martha's College, Cambridge finds herself at the centre of the intrigue. It all makes for an incisive and entertaining tale that will appeal to every reader who has stood in front of a piece of conceptual art paid for from the public purse, and wondered whether perhaps they are the butt of a private and very expensive joke.

In the sanctum of her Cambridge rooms, Jack Troutbeck rants to several friends about the distressing state of contemporary art:

"We have fought the culture wars together, my friends," she

said, waving her glass of port for emphasis. "But we cannot rest. The forces of darkness still reign. They must be overthrown. This time it's the Satanic army of the art world that must be destroyed."



Hyperbole aside, the Baroness is about to get her wish. Barely two months later a homeless person finds a man's body hanging under a bridge on the river Thames. At first the discovery is treated by the police as a

routine and isolated incident; but one by one the leading lights of the London art scene disappear. By the time no less than ten scions of the art world have gone missing even Scotland Yard is forced to admit that something more than coincidence may be at work. Before long Baroness Troutbeck herself disappears, leaving her friends – and the police – to wonder just what is going on, and who is behind it.

But that, as they say, is only the beginning. Troutbeck finds herself imprisoned with her artistic adversaries, the very same people she would crucify on the alter of Informed Opinion: they includes a naïve hedge-fund millionaire and art collector named Charles Biggs; Jason Pringle, a corrupt art dealer, Sir Henry Fortune, a curator and Jason's lover; Anastasia Holliday, an Australian performance artist who exploits the most intimate aspects of her private life to gain artistic notoriety; Hortense Wilde, a priggish art historian; Jake Thorogood, a corrupt critic; and Galvin Truss, the head of a subjectively-oriented art college. Their jailer remains mysterious, communicating only with Troutbeck, and then only by intercom. Before long he begins to make demands on the group: they are to engage in a macabre version of Big Brother, in which the penalty for losing is death. For once, Jack Troutbeck has her work cut out for her.

Setting personal perils aside, Jack Troutbeck remains merciless in her opposition to her fellow captives. In

an exchange with the head of a fashionable art school she skillfully skewers the trendy approach of substituting aimless self-indulgence for acquired skill and informed judgment:

"So let me get this clear, Dr. Truss. Young people arrive at your establishment wanting to be artists and mostly not knowing how to draw or paint... They have no skills, are subsidized by the taxpayer who thinks they are there to acquire some, yet you teach them nothing because you despise the basic skills that no artist can do without."

"We give them space, Lady Troutbeck. We give them space to fly with their inner selves."

In *Killing the Emperors* Edwards expertly mines the inner sanctum of the privileged elite in order to expose the pompousness and perfidity that drives much of the contemporary art world. She does not shy away from naming names: her list of real-world targets includes the artist Damien Hirst, Gallery owner Charles Saatchi, Director of the Tate (or as Troutbeck would have it, the Tat) Gallery, Sir Nicholas Serota, and other self-appointed arbiters of artistic taste. It is an entertaining, at times hilarious read, and has the added virtue of making some insightful (and some would say long-overdue) observations about the contemporary art scene. To say that Edwards possesses a biting

wit is an understatement: at her best she makes a tankful of piranhas look like a pre-schooler's guppy collection. Does she sometimes go over the top?

Of course, but *Killing the Emperors* is grounded firmly in fact, and highly entertaining with it, and who could say fairer than that?

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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 the *Montreal Review of Books*, as well as on his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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