

The Price of Love

Linley and Havers in Italy

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

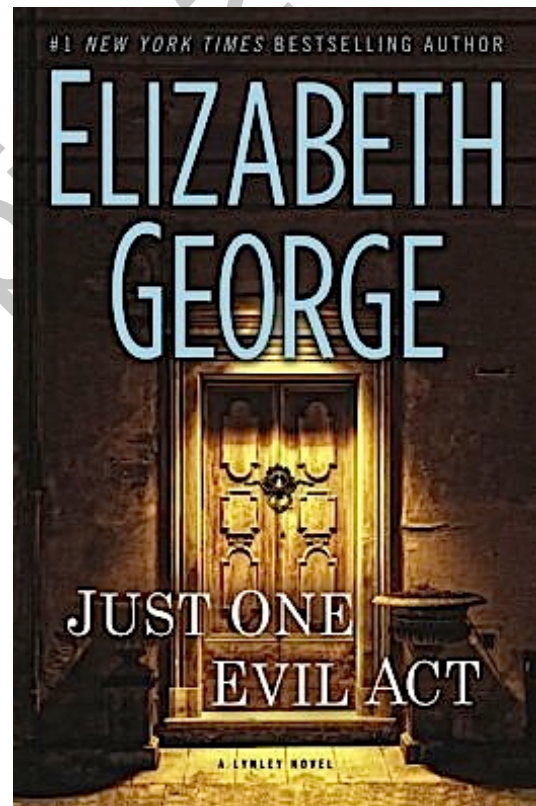
Elizabeth George's latest in her best-selling series documenting the exploits of police detectives Thomas Lynley and his headstrong second banana, DS Barbara Havers, takes them to foreign lands, opening up new possibilities for the pair, both good and bad.

With Helen gone — the victim of murder — and his brief affair with Acting Detective Superintendent Isabelle Ardery behind him, Thomas Lynley's newest heart-throb is Daidre Trehair, a veterinarian whose private pastimes include being a member of a women's roller derby team from Bristol known as Boadicea's Broads. Worlds apart, then, and a matter rife for the reader's speculation.

But it turns out there is little time to contemplate this odd-couple relationship as Havers pursues on her own a missing-persons case involving a close friend, and Lynley struggles to minimize the damage left by her bull-in-the-china-shop methods.

The layered tale constitutes a radical shift for George in both setting and character, with much of the action taking place in Italy, and centering not on Lynley, but on Havers. No stranger to becoming personally

involved in cases, Havers is once again up to her earlobes in a situation that ought not, strictly speaking, to involve her at all.



Hadiyyah Azhar, the nine-year-old daughter of a close friend and neighbour, has disappeared. Her father Taymullash Azhar, a university science professor, had returned home to find virtually all of her belongings gone from their north London flat. The

girl's parents had never married, due to the fact that the father was already married (though separated), and had refused to divorce his wife. The unspoken question hangs in the air: did the mother, Angelina Upman, take their daughter?

When Havers broaches the situation to Lynley, he is ever the realist. Even if the mother did take Hadiyyah, in the absence of a divorce and a custody ruling that she'd violated, there was nothing to warrant bringing in the police. She'd broken no law. No reason, then, to get involved.

Havers however, is, predictably unmoved. When Lynley refuses to act, she suggests to the father that she look into the matter privately. Her superior officer, Isabelle Ardrey, who happens to be the flotsam in Lynley's most recent relationship-gone-wrong, refuses to grant Havers time off. In desperation, she contacts a private investigator to look into things. As with so many decisions in Barbara's often-chaotic life, it is a move that will have unforeseen consequences.

Like its predecessors in the series, *Just One Evil Act* is no lightweight tome, weighing in at well over seven hundred pages. In that considerable space Barbara Havers will pursue the mother's family members, who feel she has brought shame upon the family. She will also attempt to use a tabloid journalist to stir the publicity pot, in an effort to bring pressure on her superiors to investigate the case, although the journalist has an agenda of his own; and she will take herself off to Italy in pursuit of leads on the

missing girl. For his part, Lynley will by turns curse Havers, try to persuade her to drop the investigation, do his best to cover up for her, and, inexorably, find himself drawn into the vortex of the conflict which threatens to end both of their careers.

A disclaimer. When I first encountered Elizabeth George's *A Great Deliverance* more than two decades ago I confess that I was put off by several features of her stories. First of all there was the character of Lynley himself: Lord Asherton, a graduate of Eton and Oxford who went around solving crimes, blamed himself for paralyzing his best friend, and seemed incapable of developing a sustained relationship with women? It sounded more than a little melodramatic, and a bad cross between the flighty (and dated) diletantism of Lord Peter Wimsey and the dark, tortured self-reflection of a John Rebus. Then there was the length. As the expression goes, too long by half. I put the book down, unfinished, and didn't return to it for nearly two years. When I did, I began reading it simply for its use of language, and I was impressed. This time I persevered, and was rewarded with a traditional puzzle mystery, but one that resonated with contemporary readers in search of a literate style. Since then I have seldom been disappointed by George's tales; even at their worst (and in my experience there is no such thing as a perfect novel in any genre) there is much to admire, and take enjoyment from, in the Lynley and Havers series. And that view seems to be supported by

the extraordinary success of the television series based on her books.

Could *Just One Evil Act* have been shorter? Yes, and without great cost. But that's true of a great many novels, both inside and without the genre. That said, among its many virtues are the facts that it addresses the complexities of contemporary shifting family relationships; the questionable ethics of journalism; privacy in the

computer age, the short-sightedness of public policies that reduce policing to mere statistics, and, not least, the layered and ever-evolving relationship between Lynley and Havers. It's also a damn entertaining tale, full of twists and red herrings that will appeal to George's considerable fan base. A great many crime novels give their readers a whole lot less.

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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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