

Crime in the Cotswolds

British crime novelist launches new series

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

In previous columns I've lamented the passing from the literary scene of such reader's favourites as Oxford's inimitable Inspector Morse and troubled Scottish police detective John Rebus. Readers – myself included – build up an emotional investment in a finely-tuned series of crime novels, but all things come to an end, and we are forced to look elsewhere for our entertainment. With so much dross out there, I often worry that the quality of crime writing is deteriorating, and that increasingly readers are being forced to settle for something second-best.

I needn't worry. Although there remain far too many mediocre writers published each year, there are as well talented and inventive and experienced authors whose tales never fail to entertain and challenge us. One such writer is Britain's Ann Granger.

It's been awhile since we've looked at Ann's novels. In September of 2006 I reviewed *A Rare Interest in Corpses*, her first tale set in Victorian times. Just over a year later I profiled *Rattling the Bones*, the final novel in the series chronicling the exploits of London-based PI Fran Verady. Both series came on the heels of her first, and very successful series featuring amateur sleuth Meredith Mitchell and her companion, Chief Inspector (later Superintendent) Alan Markby. All in all, Ann has penned no less than twenty-six mysteries since she

made her debut in 1991. And a good thing, too, as her fans around the world are always clamoring for more.



This week's pick marks the debut of the first in yet another series of crime novels from the pen of this talented writer. Although new, it features a protagonist, DI Jess Campbell, who first appeared in the Mitchell and Markby series. Still working in the Cotswolds – a picturesque region to the west of London – Campbell has a new boss, Detective Superintendent Ian Carter, who keeps very much to himself, and it seems it's

up to Jess to forge a working relationship with her new superior. Welcome to the very first of the Carter and Campbell mysteries.

Ann Granger

After reading Modern Languages at London University with a view to a literary career, Ann Hulme (her real name) worked in British embassies throughout Europe. During a stint at the British embassy in Prague she met her future husband, who also worked for the Foreign Office. They married and spent time in such exotic postings as Zambia and Germany before returning to England, where Ann resumed her first love, writing novels. Ann and her husband make their home just outside of Oxford, squarely in the Cotswolds, not coincidentally where she sets her most recent tale.

Mud, Muck and Dead Things (Headline, 2009)

Rural Gloucestershire, just west of Oxford. Wealthy urbanite Lucas Burton is not impressed with the pastoral pleasures of the English countryside. As he navigates a deserted farmer's yard on foot, not always successfully avoiding the various rural amenities that lay at his feet, he mutters disgustedly, 'Mud, muck and dead things. I hate the country.'

It seems his reflection is not only heartfelt, but portentous, as before long he stumbles over the body of a young woman who had clearly died a violent death. After retching at the sight, he stumbles toward his car, wanting no part of the police investigation that is certain to ensue. He jumps into his Mercedes and speeds away, leaving the inevitable clues to his presence. The landowner who next discovers the body reports it, and it is not long before the scene is

swarming with police, a medical examiner, and a forensics team. Detective Inspector Jess Campbell leads the investigating team, assisted by her morose Sergeant, Phil Morton. On the face of it they haven't much to go on; even the victim's identity is unknown. But as they look more deeply into things they make a startling discovery: many years earlier the site had been the scene of an earlier, even more heinous, crime, when the owners of the farm had been brutally murdered by their son. The present owner was his brother, and he is none too happy about the police poking their noses into things. The police revisit the files on the case, trying to puzzle out whether there is a connection to the more recent death. And while she grapples with the case, Jess Campbell struggles to understand her new boss, Detective Superintendent Ian Carter; but his distant and formal attitude isn't making it easy.

An accomplished crossover novel

Mud, Muck and Dead things is an accomplished novel, just what one would expect from this seasoned author. The plot is nicely interwoven with interesting characters and believable dialogue, and builds toward an exciting climax, the drama expertly played off against the bucolic setting of the English countryside. It is a tale that will appeal to Granger's existing fans, and earn the author new readers as well.

Although at first glance it looks very much like a cozy, it would be nearer the mark to say that this is a crossover novel, combining a lack of graphic violence and a gentle sense of humour with the commitment to detail of a police procedural. Granger also has adroitly woven an ongoing sub-plot into the series, the developing relationship

between DI Campbell and her taciturn boss, Superintendent Ian Carter. Will they remain distant, become closer, or even adversarial? The reader is, if you'll pardon the expression, left hanging.

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