

An ominous beauty

For debut author, setting is the key

Suspended Sentences

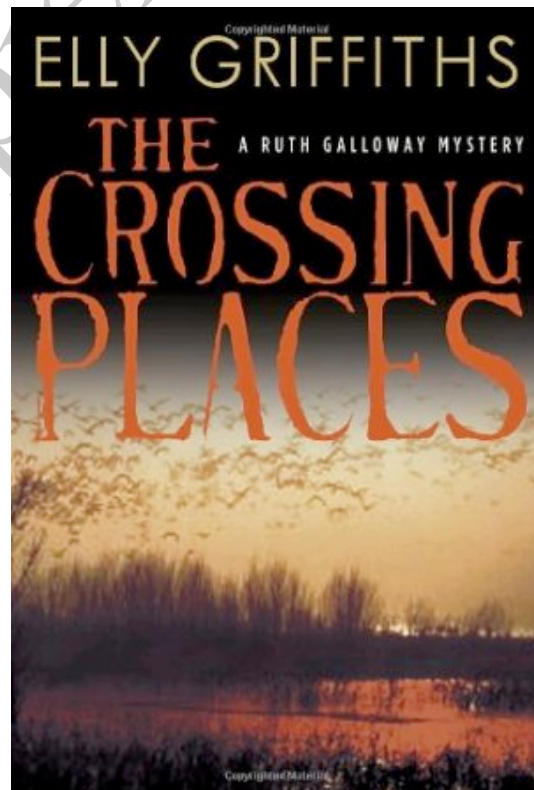
by Jim Napier

For the avid crime fiction fan there's no experience quite so rewarding as discovering a hitherto unknown author who writes well, and in a fresh voice. When the book is a debut novel and it's apparent that a series is in the offing, the discovery is all that more delightful. This week's pick is by an author perhaps not many readers will have heard of. But never fear: you will. *The Crossing Places* is that rarest of things, a first crime novel that has been published worldwide, and her publisher's confidence is not misplaced. In May it was longlisted for the Theakstons Old Peculiar Crime Novel of the Year, a competition that attracts some of the heavy hitters on both sides of the Pond. It has gone on to win well-deserved critical acclaim as well.

Elly Griffiths

Elly Griffiths is the not-very-secret pen name of Domenica de Rosa. The London-born author penned her first novel (significantly, a murder mystery) at the ripe old age of eleven, though it languished unpublished. A decade later, having read English at King's College London she entered the publishing world, effectively killing, as she tells it, any desire to write. But fortunately for the reading public, while on maternity leave she decided to put pen to paper once again, and wrote a non-mystery, *The Italian Quarter* under her real name,

which was published in 2004. She followed that with *The Eternal City* (2005), *Villa Serena* (2007), and *Summer School* (2008). So when she decided to turn her hand to crime fiction, Griffiths had already gained considerable experience, and adopted her grandmother's name to distinguish for her readers between her earlier books and her crime novels.



Reflecting her studies in English Literature Griffiths has a strong predilection for the novels of Wilkie Collins, Jane Austen, P.G. Wodehouse,

Stella Gibbons, and Evelyn Waugh; but she also has time for such accomplished writers as Harper Lee, and to some extent each of these influences show in her own writing. She enjoys cats, crosswords and Bruce Springsteen, and lives on the south coast of England, near Brighton, with her husband, who is an archeologist, and their twin children.

The Crossing Places
(McClelland & Stewart, 2009)

Ruth Galloway is a forensic archeologist at the University of North Norfolk, near the east coast of England. She lives near a saltmarsh. Part of a bird sanctuary, it has already yielded human remains dating back to the Iron Age. Ruth is a single, overweight academic quickly approaching forty; skilled and dedicated to her work, she is also solitary and diffident, weaving her chosen life's path between her work, her somewhat controlling mother, and a few close friends.

When Detective Chief Inspector Harry Nelson contacts Ruth to check out some human remains unearthed on the saltmarsh, she is only too happy to oblige. He is seeking the body of Lucy Downey, a child who disappeared a decade earlier. The bones turn out to be not those of the missing child, but ancient in origin. However, it is not long before a second child disappears, and Nelson is very concerned; for not only is the pattern of the crime similar, he has begun receiving letters from someone who claims to be the killer, taunting him to find the victim—and that also happened a decade earlier.

Inevitably the case churns up old memories from the past, both for Nelson and for Ruth, as her former tutor and lover, Erik Anderssen, returns from Norway to follow the case. And as she becomes drawn ever more tightly into

the case of the missing child, so also her relationship with the married Harry Nelson takes a turn Ruth had not predicted. Before the case is solved she will have to confront some hard choices, not least how to save her own life. For although ten years have passed a killer lurks, eager to protect his secret.

***A fine tale, set against a
forbidding landscape***

This is a fresh and absorbing book, not least because Griffiths goes against the easy formula of using engaging lead characters. While the reader may feel some sympathy for Ruth Galloway, she is not especially likeable; and Harry Nelson, the rude and brusque police detective, is even less so. But the dominating feature of *The Crossing Places* is not character, nor even plot – though it's a fine one; the single most compelling feature of the book is Griffiths vivid portrait of the bleak, forbidding landscape of the coastline along East Anglia, and she skillfully mines this setting to give her tale a strong Victorian flavour. Consider the following passage:

Rather than following the road to the car park, Ruth strikes out west, keeping to a path intended for bird watchers. As long as she sticks to the path she will be fine. The marsh lies on either side of her, huge clumps of reed and mile upon mile of wind-swept grass. The ground looks solid enough but she knows from experience that it is full of hidden pools, treacherous and deep. When the tide comes in, the sea will come halfway up the marsh, covering the ground swiftly and silently...

Griffith sets much of her plot against the ominous beauty of the Norfolk marshlands, the final resting place for the bones of both the sacrificed and the unwary; and the reader comes to realize that the tale will, as it must, come to a gripping climax on this shifting soil.

Keenly aware of the power of words, Griffiths uses a first-person/present-tense style to give her story a sense of immediacy, and it works very well. Despite Ruth's firm defenses erected to keep others out, we crawl inside her skin and feel her experiences first-hand. And interspersing the plot with narratives from the point of view of the child abducted a decade earlier lends the story a chilling tone.

An informed book, drawing upon actual legends, mythologies and symbols from antiquity to lend credibility to the plot, *The Crossing Places* is also packed with enough twists and turns to keep even the most dedicated reader guessing. Evocative, cunning, and atmospheric, *The Crossing Places* is a fine crime novel—and augurs well for the author's future.

Griffiths followed her debut novel with *The Janus Stone*. The third in her series, *The House at Sea's End*, is slated to appear in 2011. I'm looking forward to reading each of them.

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