

The Crime Novel Comes of Age

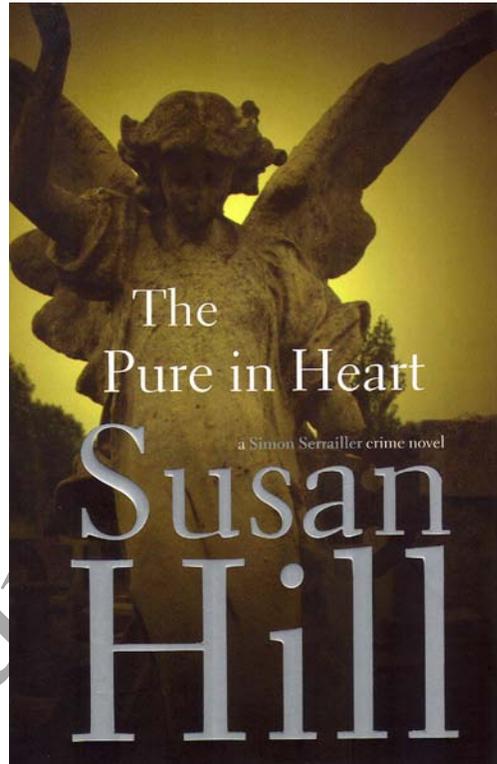
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Crime novels generally fall into one of two categories: either they are puzzle-based, or character-driven. The novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie turned on a puzzle to be solved; the characters were largely two-dimensional stereotypes, secondary to the plot, and, quite often, less than believable.

In the past thirty years, however, character-driven crime novels have come into their own. At the hands of skilled writers, the protagonists—and other major characters—have become three-dimensional figures, treated in depth, and evolving from novel to novel. Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, Ian Rankin's John Rebus, and P. D. James' Adam Dalgleish are complex characters with human frailties, coming to grips with all the complexities that life can throw at them. In such novels the stories flow from the interactions of the personalities: the characters drive the plots.

Today, the development of the character-driven crime novel is in safe hands, with the emergence of such literary talents as Britain's Susan Hill. Her novels have helped to raise the genre of crime fiction to the level of mainstream literary, or "serious" fiction. Combined with her flawless command of the written word, they make for an insightful, rewarding, and thoroughly enjoyable read.



Susan Hill

The author of more than thirty-five books, Susan Hill only turned her hand to crime fiction relatively recently. Her debut in the Simon Serrailer series was *The Various Haunts of Men* (2005). This was followed by *The Pure in Heart*, (also 2005). The third book in the series, *The Risk of Darkness*, was released just this month. Susan and her husband, the Shakespeare scholar Stanley Wells, live in a farmhouse in the Cotswolds.

The Pure in Heart
(Chatto & Windus/, 2005)

Simon Serrailer is on holiday in Venice, drawing one of that city's many sumptuous landscapes, when he is summoned home to Lafferton, England: his younger sister, Martha, is gravely ill. She is severely handi-capped, and has been institution-alized virtually all of her life. Simon rushes home to see her, knowing that he alone understands her, speaks for her, in a family composed, except for him, entirely of doctors. His father, Richard, never understood why Simon turned his back on medicine and became instead a Detective Chief Inspector in the Lafferton CID. His mother sustains the barest of relationships with her husband, and hardly more with her son. And his sister, Cat, now immanently expecting, is too stressed to mediate the various family tensions that are brought into focus by Martha's deteriorating health. They all pull rank on Simon when it comes to discussing Martha, and what should be done about her, though perhaps it is Simon who best understands his sister in human terms.

The universe, however, has a habit of running in parallel. Across town Andy Gunton is about to be released from prison, after serving almost five years for killing a man in the course of a robbery. He has learned a trade in Prison—market gardening—and he is anxious to land a job when he is released, and to avoid returning to the nightmare of prison life. He soon learns that there are few opportunities for him on the outside, and his prospects are further dimmed by a shrill, unforgiving sister and a former partner in crime who promises to tide Andy over with some questionable odd jobs.

So far, the events taking place in Lafferton are played out daily in towns across England, and indeed around the world. But they are about to take a terrible turn. A young boy waiting for a lift to school disappears, and the community is compelled to dredge up painful memories from only a year earlier, when a serial killer had descended on their quiet lives, murder-ing among others, Freya Graffham, a Detective Sergeant whom Simon realized he had loved only after her death.

Serrailer is put in charge of the missing-child case, and the resulting publicity brings another person out of his past: an ex-lover who has formed an obsessive attraction toward Serrailer, and who begins to stalk him.

Simon, then, is a man racing against time and hope to find a young child before it is too late, all the while coming to terms with his sister's failing health, his own memories, and an uncertain future.

Eloquent and multilayered

The Pure in Heart is a well-paced, multi-layered plot, populated by interesting, fully-fleshed characters immersed in evocative situations. Susan's writing is eloquent, and flows seamlessly; her novels have been compared to those of P. D. James, and it just doesn't get any better than that. Read *The Pure in Heart*; you'll want to read the others.

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