

## Like an old friend

*British detective tales evoke a bygone era*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier

Just as the real world doesn't stand still, so the world of crime writing is constantly changing. At the hands of many bestselling writers police procedurals have in recent years become edgier and darker, and the emphasis has shifted from the face-to-face interaction of a team of detectives to an emphasis on forensic investigations and scientific findings. At their best such books still involve a compelling plot, but the puzzle element is often lacking, with revelations coming out of a crime lab or a police database substituting for deduction and human interaction. The puzzle is being replaced by the thriller, where fast-paced action sets the tone of the tale.

Happily, this trend is not yet universal. More measured tales can be found, stories that emphasize the human dimension of their plots, and which allow the reader to match wits with the writer, rather than simply be informed of the result of a computer search. Picking up such a book is like having a conversation with an old friend whose company one enjoys simply for the fact of being there.

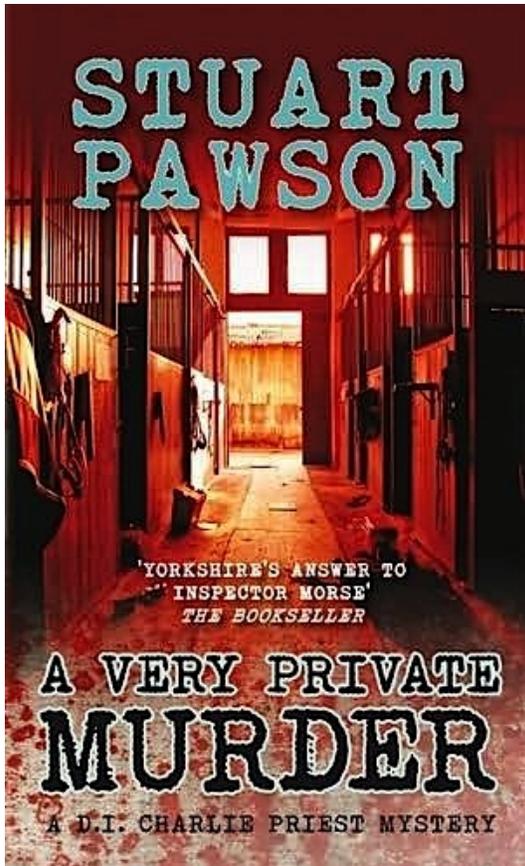
This week, three authors who, like old friends, drop by from time to time with an interesting story. Never mind that at the end of the day there is no grand sweeping theme, dramatic climax, or hugely imaginative twist near the end: it is enough that we have spent an enjoyable few hours sharing their fascinating tales.

**Stuart Pawson**

***A Very Private Murder***

(Allison & Busby, 2010)

Located in the southern Pennines of Yorkshire, the former mill town of Heckley is not exactly a hotbed of crime. But when Heckley's mayor, Arthur Threadneedle, and Ghislaine Curzon, the high-profile girlfriend of one of the Royal Princes, gather to dedicate a new shopping mall, they're in for a shock: someone has vandalized the commemorative plaque — an outrage to the Mayor and a source of amusement to Miss Curzon. The Chief Constable, present for the occasion, is embarrassed and wants the culprit brought swiftly to book. DI Charley Priest is handed the case, but before long he has a more pressing matter: a gang of thugs with a pit-bull is mugging older people, using the dog to force them to withdraw cash from nearby ATMs. As he juggles the two cases Priest discovers ample motives for the vandalism: the Mayor has been having an affair, and had also been involved in a racehorse-breeding scheme that went awry when the horse disappeared. It's not long before Threadneedle is shot, and Charley is awash with theories and suspects; and still on his plate is the pit-bull gang. Before he can close the books on these cases Charley will have to decide whether the cause of justice is best served by applying the letter of the law.



Like his other novels featuring DI Charlie Priest, *A Very Private Murder* combines deft plotting with a wide-ranging cast of (mostly) engaging characters and often humorous dialogue, all to very good effect. The forensics are there when needed, but they are never allowed to dominate the tale. The thirteenth in a very strong series which I highly recommend.

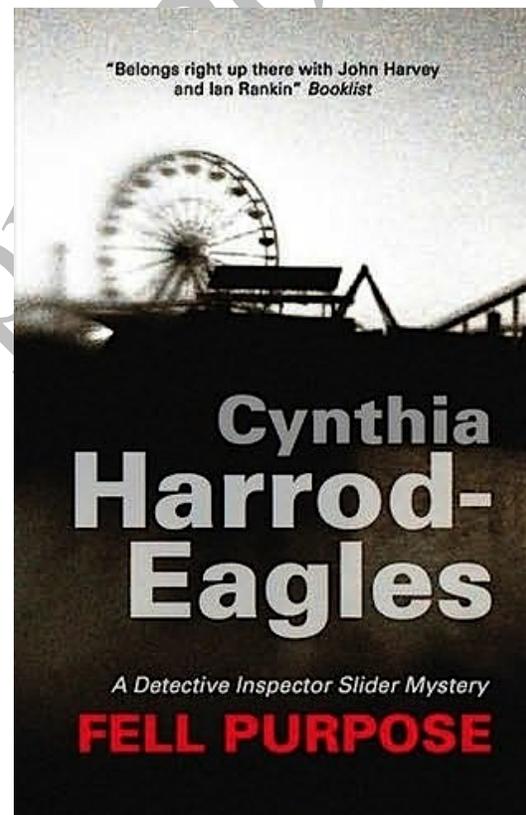
### Cynthia Harrod-Eagles

#### *Fell Purpose*

(Severn House, 2009)

Hard to believe, but it's been nearly three years since I last reviewed one of Cynthia Harrod-Eagles' novels. A shame, because she's the award-winning author of more than *eighty* (you read correctly) books, not least over a dozen London-based crime novels featuring DI Bill Slider, a nuanced figure who

combines toughness, sensitivity, and humour in a totally-believable whole. In *Fell Purpose* Slider tries to make sense of Zella Wilding, a straight-A school-girl who has gone missing from a sleep-over, and whose tarted-up body is later found in a wooded green space near Wormwood Scrubs Prison. Had Zella been leading a double life, and if so, had her controlling father somehow learned about her deceit and killed her? Or does the solution lie deeper? Slider and his crew must piece together a portrait of a young woman who seemed to live several different lives.



Combining a dramatic storyline with crackling dialogue and a strong sense of place, Harrod-Eagles has produced a gripping tale that explores the changing lifestyles of today's youth, juxtaposed against the also-evolving relationships that exist between Slider and his second wife and their infant son, and Slider's

relationship with his aging father. On several levels, then, *Fell Purpose* is a crime novel as good as any written today.

**Ruth Rendell**

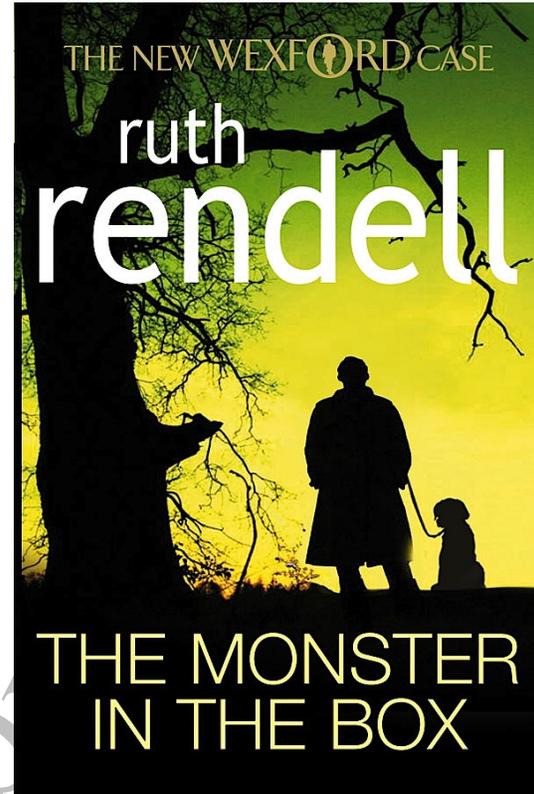
***The Monster in the Box***

(Doubleday Canada, 2009)

Chief Inspector Wexford has been with us a very long while indeed. He first appeared on the literary scene in 1964, in *From Doon with Death*. Since then Wexford has been the focus of more than twenty additional crime novels, defining for many readers the essence of the modern British police detective. In *The Monster in the Box* Wexford revisits a case that dates from his time as a young officer in uniform. A woman had been found dead, strangled at home while her husband was out playing cards with friends. There was no doubt that he could not have killed her. But another man had been in the street, exercising his dog when the police investigated the scene. That man was Eric Targo, and Wexford knew him to be many things: a van-driver, property developer, kennel owner, and a murderer. Over the decades several mysterious deaths had occurred, and in each case the culprit was never found. But Wexford knew, beyond any doubt, that Targo had been responsible in each case, and Targo knew that he knew. Their encounters had been few over the years, and had grown into a macabre game on Targo's part: he would smile at Wexford, acknowledging what both of them knew: that he was responsible, and that Wexford could do nothing about it.

But that is about to change. A young Islamic woman, Tamima Rahman, had taken up with a Bosnian boy, contrary to the family's wishes. Now Tamima has gone missing. Is Targo involved, and if

so, is this the opportunity Wexford has been waiting for?



A fine, layered cat-and-mouse suspense tale from a master storyteller, *The Monster in the Box* shows Rendell at the peak of her form. Read this one and you will want to read the others.

Are such traditional 'puzzle' novels simply old fashioned, and out-of-date? In an era seemingly dominated by Twittering and Facebook, such books will surely not appeal to everyone. But remember, what goes around comes around, and the only thing for certain is that the recent wave of fast-paced forensics-driven tales will itself not last forever. I predict that novels like these, *sans* the flash and the glitter, will be with us for a very long while.

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