

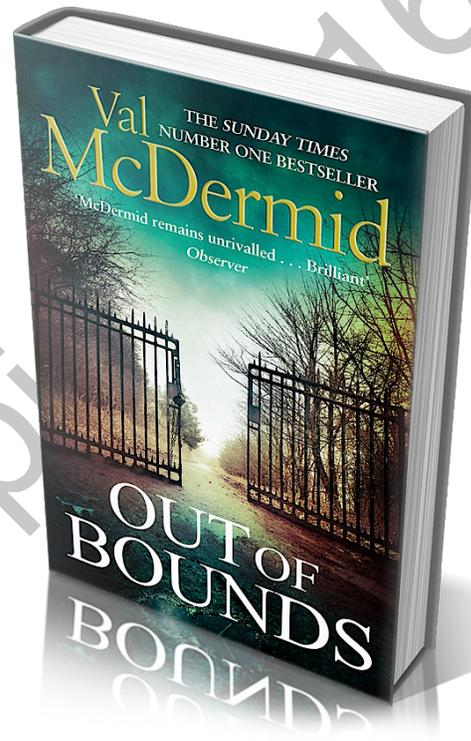
Tour de Force: *Val McDermid's latest her best yet*

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

When Edinburgh youth Ross Garvie and his mates decide to steal a car and go joy-riding, his actions set in motion a train of events that reaches back decades and will extend into the future. Garvie winds up in hospital in a coma and his friends wind up dead, but a routine sample collected by the hospital to determine Garvie's blood alcohol level turns up a DNA match involving a rape and murder that occurred over twenty years earlier. At his age Garvie can't be the perp, but someone in his family is. That's enough to interest DCI Karen Pirie, the head of Police Scotland's Historic Cases Unit.

Although following up the DNA link would seem to be routine, it turns out to be anything but. It seems that Garvie was adopted – a fact that his mother has so far kept secret from him. Pursuing it might mean that Garvie's privacy rights, and those of his adopted mother, could be violated. To Pirie the matter is straightforward: the right to privacy of Garvie and his family should not trump the right of a murder victim to have justice done. But under Scottish law the issue will have to be decided by the Sheriff's Court, which could go either way.



It's not long before another case lands on her plate. A mentally-challenged man by the name of Gabriel Abbot is found dead on a path bench. It seems like a routine case of suicide. Hardly a cold case, and nothing to concern Pirie, except for one thing: twenty-two years ago Abbot's mother had been murdered, and although her death (and those of three others) had been attributed to the IRA, no one had ever been identified as her killer. Two apparently unrelated murders in the same family? Pirie doesn't believe

in coincidences, and she decides to look into the killings.

But life is seldom simple, and Karen Pirie's personal life is not untroubled. She's still recovering from the death of her personal lover and colleague, killed while working a case only months earlier. Suffering from insomnia and bad dreams, she's taken to wandering the largely deserted streets of Edinburgh in the early hours of the morning, until one evening she encounters a group of Syrian refugees huddled around a campfire. Victims of the system, they gather to lament their fate. They only seek to make use of the skills they brought from their homeland, but immigration rules prevent them from working until their status is settled. Pirie has enough on her plate already, but their situation bothers her, and she seeks a way to help the Syrians deal with their plight.

Pirie's problems do not end there. Her assistant, DC Jason Murray, is a well-meaning-but-wet-behind-the-ears officer who's still learning his trade, and it's a constant struggle to get him up to speed. And to round matters off, she's engaged in ongoing battles with the officer who is handling the Gabriel Abbot case (and who is prepared to write it off as suicide),

and also with her boss, Assistant Chief Constable Simon Lees. He's arrogant, condescending, unimaginative, and big on flaunting his authority. It doesn't help her cause that she'd coined the nickname by which he's become known around the station -- the macaroon, a clear reference to a sugary confection that lacks substance.

To succeed, then, Pirie will have to use all her wits, and she draws into her circle of allies a social worker and school friend from years ago, a pathologist who seeks to bridge the gap between her own, routine work and forensic analysis, and a lawyer who's prepared to argue rights issues in court. But when push comes to shove, Karen Pirie will find herself on a dark street alone, and stalked by a killer.

So develops an original, exquisitely-layered, and superbly-told tale, revolving around the most engaging protagonist I've run across in a very long time. *Out of Bounds* is easily among the top half-dozen crime novels I've read in the past ten years, and her best yet. I look forward to the next in this compelling, beautifully-written series.

Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January magazine*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine* the *Montreal Review of Books*, the *Ottawa Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, <http://deadlydiversions.com/> He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com