

Rebus Returns?

Rankin's latest echoes earlier works

Suspended Sentences

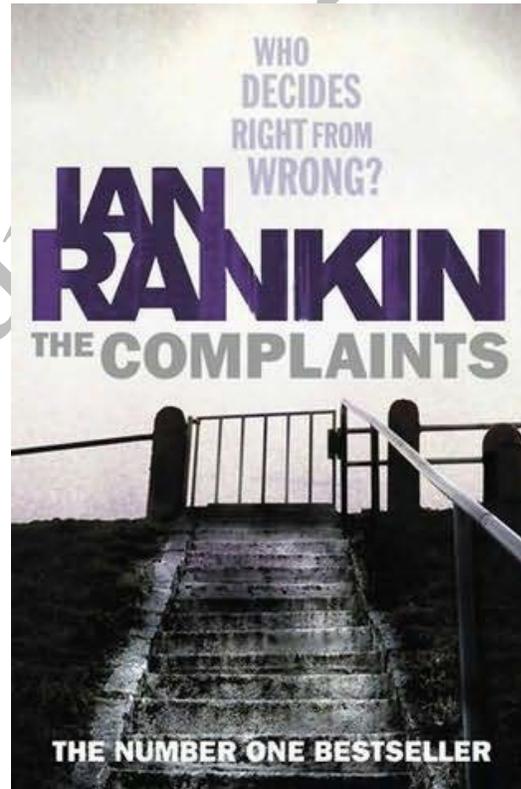
by Jim Napier

For over twenty years he's been laying bare the dark soul of crime-laden Edinburgh and its equally troubled police force. Two decades ago Ian Rankin created one of the most popular and likely enduring figures in contemporary crime fiction, in the form of Detective Inspector John Rebus, the flawed protagonist of nearly twenty novels. And committed to realism: when Rebus hit the mandatory retirement age (in the Scottish Police Service) of fifty, Rankin mercilessly shelved him, to the dismay of readers around the world.

Not to worry, though. The award-winning bestselling author followed the Rebus canon with a standalone, *Doors Open*, a caper tale reviewed in these pages almost exactly a year ago. It was a fine story, one that had readers pulling for the protagonist, even though we knew that in the end he had to fail. But Rebus was still absent from the scene.

Now Rankin has returned with yet another police procedural. Like its predecessors it is based in Edinburgh, but features a new protagonist, Detective Inspector Malcolm Fox. Fox is attached to The Complaints and Conduct Unit, charged with investigating wrongdoing by other officers. Much of the unit's work is routine, consisting of fielding complaints from neighbours annoyed about cops who play their music too loud, or patrol cars parked in spots

reserved for the disabled. But Fox is a member of an elite sub-group of The Complaints known as the PSU, or Professional Standards Unit, and their brief is more serious: to investigate racism and corruption within the police force.



Like John Rebus, Fox doesn't always maintain the best of relations with those around him, the result of having high personal standards and taking his job seriously. A laudible quality no doubt, but not necessarily one that's calculated to help him climb the career ladder.

Also like Rebus, Fox refuses to let the seamier aspects of his job corrupt his loyalties to family and friends. He retains his humanity in an often grimy, sometimes brutal world, even though it sometimes comes at a high personal cost.

Put those two traits together and you have a man willing to follow a case wherever it leads him. In short, someone eerily like John Rebus.

Ian Rankin
The Complaints
(Orion Books, 2009)

As a member of *The Complaints*, Edinburgh DI Malcolm Fox gets more than his share of grief. He's just winding up an inquiry of Glen Heaton, a fellow officer who's been leaking information to criminals. Problem is, Heaton has powerful friends. The dust has hardly settled when Fox is assigned a particularly troubling case involving DS Jamie Breck, another officer in the same unit who's suspected of being part of an internet porn ring involving children. Since a search warrant would alert Breck and other members of the porn ring, they'd like Fox to befriend Breck, and gain access to his home computer. Fox knows his snooping carries risks, but the case turns his stomach, and reluctantly he agrees to help the child exploitation team gather information on the man.

Divorced and essentially a loner, Fox has two family members living in the area. His father is marking time in a retirement home Fox struggles to pay for, after suffering from cancer and the death of his wife. Fox visits whenever he can find the time and the resolve. His sister, Jude, lives in a nearby flat with her abusive boyfriend, Vince Faulkner.

When a neighbour alerts Fox and he calls on Jude, he is dismayed to see that she has a broken arm. Although she insists it was an accident, he knows better. He urges her to lay charges, but she refuses. Fox would like nothing better than to look her boyfriend up and set him straight, but as a member of *The Complaints* he's held to a higher standard. Life is not always tidy, but it would end his career if he used his position to put muscle on Faulkner.

Shortly after Fox shares the story of his sister's situation with fellow cops, Faulkner's body is found on a local building site: he's been beaten to death. More disturbingly, the officer who's working the homicide case is DS Jamie Breck, the very person Fox is supposed to be investigating. Fox tries to beg off the porn case on the basis of personal involvement, but the officers press him to use the opportunity to learn more about Breck.

Wheels within wheels. When Breck learns that a fellow officer and friend of Fox's used the police database to get information on Vince Faulkner the same day that Fox learned of his sister's broken arm, he starts asking tough questions. To the big boys upstairs – no fans of *The Complaints* – it looks more and more like Fox was involved in Faulkner's death, and he's forced to work with the very man he's investigating to prove that he isn't. It is a situation fraught with danger for both men.

At the peak of his powers

The Complaints marks the return of Rankin to the genre he does best, a move that will be welcomed by his readers. As always, the plot is compelling, the characters are exquisitely drawn, the dialogue sharp and utterly believable.

Rankin skillfully exploits the moody setting of Scotland's capital, juxtaposing scenes from a vanishing past with contemporary realities. The writing is layered and nuanced, the resolution bittersweet; just what we would expect from this seasoned veteran, still at the peak of his prodigious literary powers. With his patent similarities to John Rebus (failed marriage, drinking problem, disrespect for authority and willingness to ignore the system) one cannot but wonder whether in future tales Malcolm Fox will cross paths with Detective Sergeant Siobhan Clarke (she of the Rebus tales), and help to fill the void created by the detective's departure. Seems like a match made in Heaven. Whatever the outcome, Rankin fans have cause to rejoice: by any other name, Rebus is back.

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