

Summer's Lease

A change of locale produces unexpected pleasures

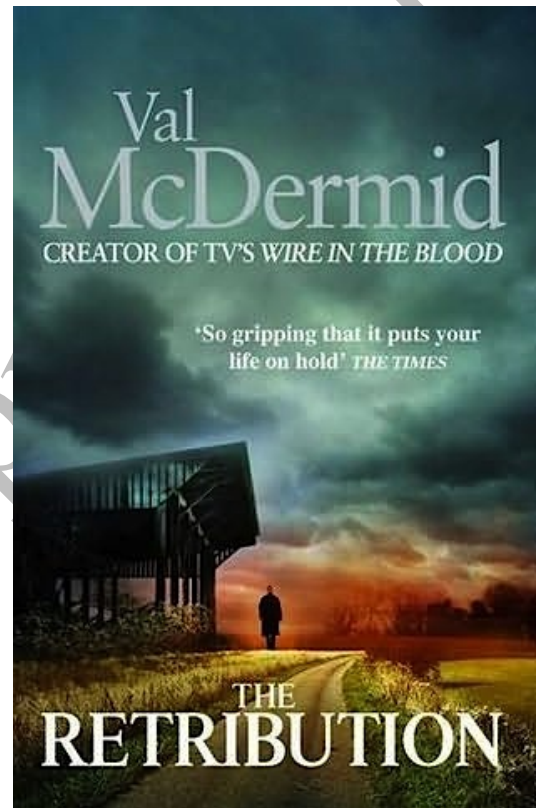
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

After an absence of several years I returned this summer to Britain's annual celebration of crime writing at St. Hilda's College, Oxford. The St. Hilda's event is a notable departure from the more well-known, and larger, crime-writing festivals held in Britain and around the world: taking place on the secluded grounds of Oxford's last college for women to go co-ed, it attracts perhaps three dozen writers and as many fans. The scale, pace, and setting of the event are unique: the weekend-long program consists of single-tracked talks by acclaimed authors, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to see and hear each presenter, and indeed to dine and talk with them at some length. And then, of course, there's the incomparable backdrop of Oxford itself. In all, my wife and I spent a leisurely week there this summer, exploring the colleges, churches, and, it must be said, a few of the pubs in that unique city, as well as the surrounding countryside, before moving on to other regions.

But as the saying goes, it wasn't all cakes and ale. While at St Hilda's I had the opportunity to renew some old friendships and forge some new ones, and for this week's column I have culled three novels from authors at the conference that I can enthusiastically recommend. Each is an entertaining read by a seasoned writer, and will have you curled up in an armchair, providing

you with several hours of pleasure—and perhaps a bit of terror...



**Val McDermid,
*The Retribution***

(Little, Brown/Hachette UK, 2011)

Well-known among British crime-writing fans, author Val McDermid has sold over ten million copies of her works in more than thirty languages, some of which have been filmed for television. In 2010 Val was awarded the CWA Cartier Diamond Dagger for Lifetime Achievement in the field of crime writing, and readers may recall the

compelling British TV series *The Wire in the Blood*, based on her books.

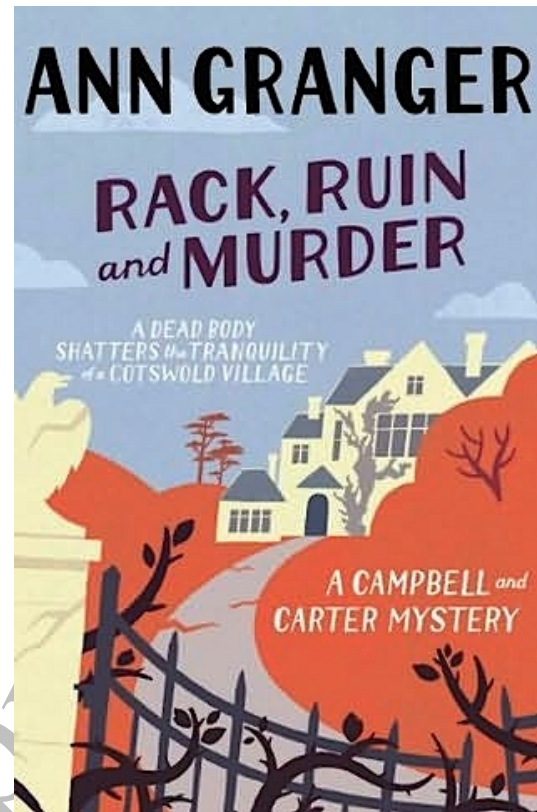
In *The Retribution* forensic profiler Dr. Tony Hill is forced to confront a former nemesis. Jacko Vance was a brutal psychopath who killed seventeen girls and a police officer; Hill had helped put him in prison years ago. Faced with a lifetime in prison with no chance of parole, Vance promised himself he would escape. Now he has made good on his word, and is looking for revenge on Tony Hill—and DCI Carol Jordan—for the time he spent behind bars.

A gripping tale that explores the nuanced relationship between Hill and Jordan set against the twisted mind of a serial killer, *The Retribution* is as good or better than any crime thriller written since Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs*. It will have you on the edge of your seat, torn between turning the next page and putting it down—but totally unable to do so. An exquisite blend of pure thriller and layered, evocative tale of a complex relationship between Hill and Jordan, who cannot put to rest the differences—and attractions—between them, even as their lives are on the line. *The Retribution* is a superb thriller, in the best tradition of exceptional crime-writing.

**Ann Granger,
Rack, Ruin and Murder
(Headline, 2011)**

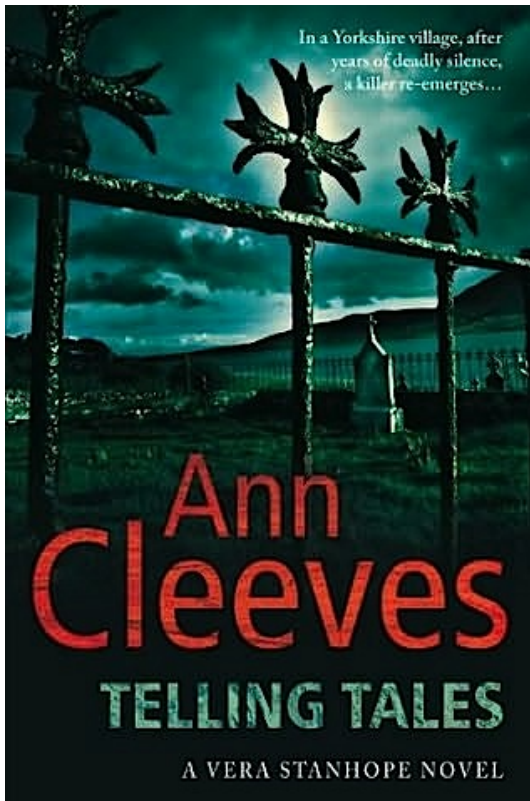
Ann Granger has a solid pedigree among British crime writers, having penned more than two dozen novels in four distinct series spanning Victorian times to the present. Her most recent tales are set in the Cotswolds, and feature Inspector Jess Campbell and Superintendent Ian Carter. The debut novel in this engrossing series, *Mud, Muck and*

Dead Things, was reviewed in these pages in September of 2009.



In the Cotswold village of Weston St. Ambrose, Monty Bickerstaffe, an elderly and irascible curmudgeon living alone, makes a particularly unwelcome discovery: there is a body on the horsehair sofa in his drawing room. Nothing for it, of course, but to call in the police—though Monty would prefer not to have them sniffing around. Matters are not helped when the identity of the victim remains elusive. Then there are the nagging questions of how the victim died, how he got into the crumbling manor house, and why one of the upstairs rooms had been recently cleaned when Monty claimed he had lived only on the ground floor for years. Campbell and Ian Carter find themselves looking into Monty's family history in the course of their investigation, and like most families, there are a few skeletons to be, err, unearthed...

Putting one in mind of the classic village mysteries made popular by Agatha Christie and the more recent *Midsomer Murder* dramatizations for television, Granger's novel is an enjoyable trip down memory lane. But make no mistake, *Rack, Ruin and Murder* is very much an original and contemporary tale by an accomplished author, and a welcome alternative to some of the more graphic writing currently out there.



**Ann Cleeves,
Telling Tales
(reissued by Pan Macmillan in 2010)**

An accomplished crime writer perhaps less well known in North America, Ann Cleeves is highly regarded, having published nearly two dozen tales encompassing three series. Of these, her stories featuring Detective Inspector Vera Stanhope are emerging on DVD, and the series will be very much worth

looking for when it is broadcast on these shores.

Telling Tales follows Vera Stanhope as she revisits a cold case. A decade earlier Abigail Mantel, a fifteen-year-old girl from a small village in East Yorkshire, had been murdered, and a local woman, Jeanie Long, had been convicted and imprisoned for the crime. New evidence suggests she was innocent, meaning a killer is still out there. Vera reopens the file, laying bare old wounds and stirring new suspicions among the isolated villagers.

Cleeves skillfully sets her nuanced characters against a stark Yorkshire landscape to drive her narrative, lending both authenticity and atmosphere to her tale. Readers new to Cleeves' stories will be sent to the stacks in search of her other introspective and insightful novels. They won't be disappointed.

The St. Hilda's conference attracted many other captivating crime writers, and in subsequent columns I will be highlighting their works as well.

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