

Conflict, Character, and Conscience

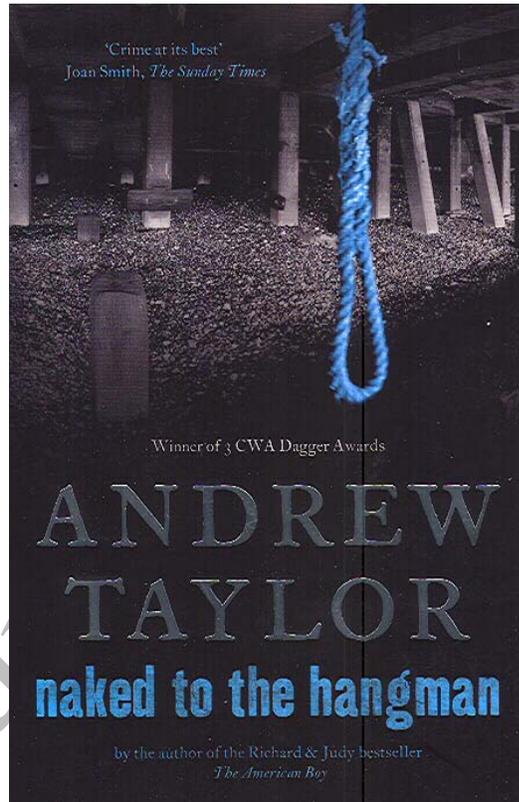
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Often a good story revolves around a few distinctive characters convincingly portrayed, or a dizzying, nonstop sequence of events that compel the reader to follow the action. This week's pick is different. Here the central element is simply a time and place. But as you explore its pages, you will find yourself carried along effortlessly, driven to reflect on the subtle interplay between people's characters and the events they set in motion.

Andrew Taylor

Crime writer Val McDermid has called Andrew Taylor "Britain's best-kept secret." A slight, unprepossessing man whose quiet demeanor masks a keen intelligence and a self-effacing sense of humour, Andrew grew up in the Fen country of East Anglia, and was educated at Cambridge University and University College London. After working as a boatbuilder, wages clerk, teacher, librarian, labourer and freelance publisher's editor, in 1981 Andrew turned his hand to writing full time. His first book, *Caroline Minuscule*, appeared in 1982, and garnered the John Creasey Memorial Award from the British Crime Writers' Association, as well as an Edgar Scroll from the Mystery Writers of America. A few of his many subsequent awards include the CWA's Gold Dagger for *Our Fathers' Lies*, the Ellis Peters Dagger for Historical Fiction for *The Office Of The Dead* (2001) and the same award again in 2003 for *The American Boy* — the only author to have won that award twice.



Andrew has several series going simultaneously, including his Roth Trilogy, about a female serial killer (currently being filmed by ITV for a television series), the Dougal series, featuring detective William Dougal, who occasionally commits murders as well as solves them; the Blaines Trilogy, a counter-intelligence series whose chronology stretches from before WW II to the Cold War; and books for younger readers. In 2003 he published *The American Boy*, a historical novel which revolves round the boyhood of Edgar Allan Poe during his time in early nineteenth-century England. Andrew's latest novels are a standalone psychological thriller called *A Stain On The*

Silence, and the eighth Lydmouth book, *Naked To The Hangman*.

Andrew and his wife (and plot consultant) Caroline live with their children Sarah and Will in the captivating Forest of Dean, perched on the border between England and Wales. They have two cats named Max and Tom.

***Naked to the Hangman*
(Hodder and Stoughton, 2006)**

April, the 1950's. Spring is supposed to be a time of rebirth, but in the hilly Welsh border counties just west of England, the River Lyd has breached its banks, threatening death and destruction. As the rising waters threaten to inundate the village of Lydmouth, the townspeople struggle to go about their daily affairs. Teenagers Gina Merini, Walter Raven, Elizabeth Thornhill and Emily Brown look forward to an upcoming dance, a fundraiser for a local charity. Their parents wrestle with various dilemmas of small-town life: for Mrs. Merini it's how to control her precocious daughter, Gina, and her advances to Walter, who has promised to take Emily Brown to the dance. Edith Thornhill puzzles over her husband's increasingly taciturn and secretive behaviour, aware of his intimate past with Jill Francis, a reporter for the *Lydmouth Gazette*. Author Patrick Raven struggles with his own infatuation for Jill; and Marjorie Brown obsesses over the disappearance of some money from her daughter Emily's coat at the dance rehearsal.

But life in Lydmouth is about to take on a whole new dimension. Two strangers have recently entered the village — the first intent on preserving his life, the other committed to ending it. Detective Chief Inspector Richard Thornhill is drawn into this maelstrom, which has its

roots in his own post-war police service in Palestine. His wife Edith realizes something is wrong, and his superior, Deputy Chief Constable Vincent Drake orders Thornhill to take some time off. But Thornhill cannot escape the problem, which jeopardizes not only his career, but also his life. Before it is over, the crisis will reach out and engulf even the village children, and more than one life will be taken; for in this village of sheltered secrets and long-simmering fears, "the Angel of Death wears khaki shorts and drives a Ford van."

***Explores the tension between
character and circumstance***

Although the characters in *Naked to the Hangman* are finely drawn, ultimately it is the setting — the time and place, that takes centre stage. The isolated village on the border between England and Wales, and the period in which these events take place — the 1950s — are of crucial importance, setting the stage for the manners and morals of the characters. Andrew Taylor skillfully adopts multiple viewpoints, revealing each character's place in the community. And although the story, barring flashbacks, take place over the course of only a few days, the events are carefully revealed within a context of events long past. The result is an engrossing tale that effortlessly carries the reader along to its gripping conclusion.

Naked to the Hangman is a literary time capsule that will both resonate with older readers and engage younger readers in a thoughtful, finely-crafted tale that skillfully examines the dramatic tension between character and circumstance. I recommend it highly.

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