

Victim or villain?

Crime thriller poses the question

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

This week's pick addresses a timely topic: the effects of war on those who return home, altered forever by their experience. On another level it is about coming to terms with a flawed past and a personal future in which there is little room for hope. Although the circumstances faced by the protagonist in this tale are unique, the larger issues of guilt and anger and adjusting to a changed world transcend this story, challenging our easy categories of black and white, good and bad, victim and villain.

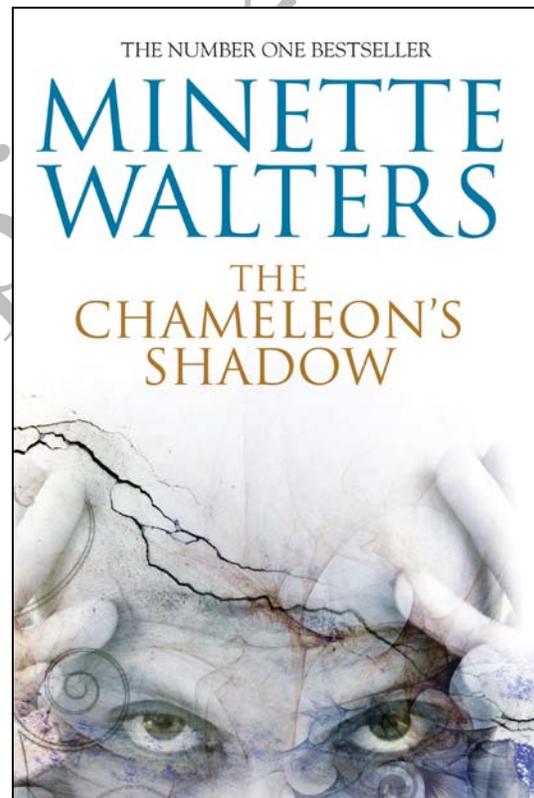
Minette Walters

Minette Walters is a contemporary master of the psychological thriller. In 1992 her debut novel, *The Ice House*, won the UK's Crime Writers' Association John Creasey Award for Best First Novel. *The Sculptress*, her second novel, garnered the 1993 Edgar Allen Poe Award for Best Crime Novel published in America, and was followed by *The Scold's Bridle*, which earned her the CWA Gold Dagger in 1994. *The Dark Room* and *The Echo* completed her first five novels. Astonishingly, all five were made into films by the BBC and broadcast on PBS to much success. To date her works have been published in more than thirty-five countries around the world, and have earned her numerous international prizes, as well as an honorary doctorate in letters from Bournemouth University.

The mother of two grown boys, Minette and her husband Alec live in an 18th-

century manor house in Dorset with their two golden retrievers, Benson and Hedges, and assorted chickens, sheep, geese, bees, and occasionally pigs.

The Chameleon's Shadow is Minette's twelfth crime thriller.



The Chameleon's Shadow (Macmillan, 2007)

Lieutenant Charles Acland has recently returned to England from Iraq, where he served in an armoured unit of the British coalition forces. While there his vehicle was struck by a roadside bomb, killing two of Acland's men and severely

injuring the twenty-six-year-old officer. He has lost an eye and one side of his face is severely scarred. Acland carries deep psychological scars as well, radiating a full range of emotions, ranging from guilt at the fate of his men, to anger, directed at pretty well everyone around him. Reconstructive surgery and counselling has failed to heal either his physical or the emotional damage.

As he recovers in a hospital in Birmingham Acland questions his doctors about when he can return to his unit. It is, of course, out of the question. In military operations the days of Lord Nelson are long gone: a one-eyed officer is seen as a liability, not an asset. Acland must come to grips with the fact that he will never return to active duty, and accept that he was not responsible for the death of his men.

Acland faces another challenge as well: he seems to harbour a deep-seated hostility toward all women. When an auxiliary nurse attempts to straighten his bed he tells her to get her hands off him. When his mother visits and tries to comb his hair, he grabs her by the wrist and forces her arm on to the bed. And although his former fiancée, Jennifer Morley, wants to visit him in hospital Acland refuses to see her; when she manages to get into his room he attacks her violently, kept from strangling her only by a burly orderly who responds to her screams.

Shortly after being let out of the hospital Acland is involved in a pub brawl with a Pakistani stockbroker. Acland is questioned by the police, who initially accept his account that the confrontation was provoked by the businessman and exacerbated by the soldier's recurrent migraines. The publican, a lesbian doctor named Jackson with the physique of a wrestler, is drawn to Acland's plight. She offers him a room over the pub and

attempts to help him adjust to his changed world. But not long afterwards Acland has a verbal confrontation with an elderly man at a bank machine, and only just avoids attacking him physically as well. Clearly, Charles Acland is a deeply disturbed young man.

In the days that follow several men are found dead, the victims of vicious attacks. When the man at the bank machine is hospitalized following an assault, he identifies Acland as his attacker, and the police begin to take an active interest in the former soldier. As victims pile up Acland becomes a prime suspect, his belligerence and indifference doing little to assuage their suspicions. Jackson, however, is not convinced; she sees a deeply troubled, but not an evil, man. Despite his misgivings Acland is forced to accept Jackson's help in proving his innocence, and by the time the police learn the identity of the murderer, Acland's world will be turned upside down.

A layered, compelling thriller

With its topical subject, unlikely protagonist, and intricate plot, *The Chameleon's Shadow* is one of the most original and compelling psychological thrillers I've read in years. The characters are richly drawn, the action is nicely paced, and the verbal exchanges between a diffident Charles Acland and the crusty Dr. Jackson are layered with ambiguity, as each struggles to test the other's limits. Vintage Minette Walters, this novel takes readers on an emotional journey to places they have not been before. It is a fine read, cunningly crafted, and will provoke readers to rethink their attitudes toward people around them.

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