

A Salmagundi of Slaughter

By [OTTO PENZLER](#) | November 21, 2007

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You have to give it to Ian Rankin: He just doesn't quit. As he was writing his first crime novel, "Knots and Crosses," he introduced an Edinburgh police detective, John Rebus, to the world. Having no expectations (or even hopes, for that matter) that he would write about the character again, he contemplated killing him at the end of the book for dramatic effect.

It was not the most auspicious debut in the history of detective fiction, as buyers were as rare as warmhearted jihadists. His second book, "Watchman," was a spy novel. His third was an attempt to emulate the success of Tom Clancy, filling the pages of "Westwind" with technological gadgetry. It enjoyed all the success of the previous two books, meaning that his literary future was darker than a Russian drama.

But Mr. Rankin had the good fortune to have an editor who was as patient as a heartache and asked him to try Rebus again. "Strip Jack" did a little better, and a few books later, the happy author found himself on the bestseller list; he eventually became one of the best-selling writers in the world, translated into 26 languages and with a television series made from his books.

"Thank God he didn't die," Mr. Rankin said of his hero, and millions of readers agree.

So now we have "Exit Music," which has been published only in the U.K. so far, with American publication scheduled for next year. Mr. Rankin couldn't kill him, so now he has forced him into retirement — or, rather, the Edinburgh police department did. Having brought the tough old cop along in real years, he turned 60, which is mandatory retirement age in the department.

Arthur Conan Doyle, another splendid Scottish mystery writer, tried to kill his detective by having him struggle with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, at the edge of Switzerland's Reichenbach Falls, both plunging to their death. Public outrage eventually forced Doyle to bring him back in "The Hound of the Baskervilles" and many other works.

While Mr. Rankin hasn't done anything quite so drastic as eliminating his much-loved protagonist, readers will still mourn his disappearance from the shelves. There is hope, however, though not in the immediate future. The possibility exists that Siobhan Clarke, Rebus's sidekick, will star in her own book, as well as the notion that Rebus might return to work in Edinburgh's cold case unit, which is staffed by retired criminal investigation department detectives.

Readers may not publicly mourn the retirement of Rebus, nor send death threats to the author (as they did to Doyle), but we must accept the fact that the literature of crime has a little hole that wasn't there before.

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The Wolfe Pack, that coterie of aficionados of the works of Rex Stout (notably the Nero Wolfe mysteries), has been active for more than three decades, and I heartily recommend that you join them in their celebration of a terrific author and the mystery genre in general.

On December 1, it will celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Black Orchid Banquet, traditionally-held in New York on the first Saturday in December. Featured events of the evening include a menu inspired by dishes found in the 72 Wolfe novels and novellas, a talk by Donald E. Westlake, a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, and the awarding of the annual Nero Award.

The three finalists for the award, given for literary excellence in the mystery genre, are Jan Burke for "Kidnapped" (Simon & Schuster), Julia Spencer-Fleming for "All Mortal Flesh" (St. Martin's/Minotaur), and Steve Hamilton for "A Stolen Season" (St. Martin's/Minotaur).

Previous winners of the award have included Lawrence Sanders, Lee Child, John Dunning, and Michael Connelly.

The organization also sponsors the Black Orchid Novella Award, which seeks novellas "in the tradition of Nero Wolfe," meaning no gratuitous sex or violence and real detective work by a real detective (amateur or professional). The length is 15–20,000 words. The winner receives a cash prize of \$1,000 and will be published in "Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine."

You can have a two-year membership in the Wolfe Pack for \$35, including four issues of "the Nero Wolfe Gazette," which is filled with critical articles, games, puzzles, quizzes, etc.

For more details on any or all of the above, visit the Wolfe Pack's website: www.nerowolfe.org.

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Lest you think this column is mere frivolity, here is some wisdom to tuck away, from Harry Kemelman in "Friday the Rabbi Slept Late": "Misfortune can happen to anyone. Only the dead are safe from it."

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