Books

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There's nothing genteel about Minette Walters' murders. But, as she tells **Kavitha Rao**, there's method in her mayhem

Killer queen

"MY MOTHER ONCE asked me why I didn't write a book about a 'nice little murder', like someone putting a cushion over an old woman's head," says crime writer Minette Walters with a laugh. "That would be too easy for me."

Walters doesn't do "nice little murders". Nor does she do easy ones. Along with P.D. James and Ruth Rendall, she's considered one of the queens of crime fiction. But her gritty, contemporary mysteries couldn't be further removed from the cosy, tea-in-the-vicarage murders often associated with female crime writers. Walters has her finger on the pulse of modern Britain, tackling such topical issues as paedophilia, domestic violence, racial prejudice, the Iraq war and homelessness. Yet her 12 novels – almost one a year since 1992 – retain the flavour of good old-fashioned whodunits.

Walters' new book, *The Devil's Feather*, is her first in an international setting. Connie Burns is a Reuter's correspondent in Sierra Leone, where five women are raped and murdered against the backdrop of genocide. Connie suspects a Scottish mercenary who uses the mayhem of war as camouflage for his own sadistic fantasies. She encounters him again in war-torn Baghdad, and a cat-and-mouse game ensues. The term "devil's feather" is a Turkish expression for a woman who unwittingly stirs up a man's interest.

Walters was inspired to write the novel while visiting Sierra Leone with French charity *Medecin San Frontieres*. "I was appalled by the chaos, even two years after the war ended. I thought, 'What a wonderful cover for a man who took pleasure in killing'." Revelations about the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners of war in the Abu Ghraib prison camp shocked her. "The western coalition was so morally certain that it was doing the right thing," she says. "Of course, when the events of Abu Ghraib rocked the world, we realised there was sadism and cruelty on both sides."

Unusually for crime writers, Walters' books are all one-offs with no series character – which doesn't seem to have deterred readers. Her first three – *The Ice House*, *The Sculptress* and *The Scold's Bridle* – all won major awards and put her on best-seller lists. Five of her novels have been adapted for television (two are showing on BBC Prime), starring the likes of Clive Owen, Daniel Craig and Miranda Richardson.

Walters says she's the envy of her crime writing peers. "Not having a series character gives me so much more freedom," she says. "I can tackle whatever I want, and not be shackled to a particular place, time or person. I'd find it tedious to remain in a comfortable formula and to use the same detective every time. Besides, I didn't want to end up like Agatha Christie, who apparently hated [her fictional creation] Hercule Poirot."

Walters' more recent books were inspired by actual events such as a race-hate killing, newspaper campaigns against paedophiles, September 11 and the debate in Britain about banning foxhunting. "I like the idea that, by setting my stories against a contemporary event, I root the story firmly for my reader and they know what I'm talking about." For a writer who loves the genteel novels of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, Walters' own books aren't for the squeamish – although she denies that they're particularly violent.

"I do leave quite a lot unsaid, because I'm aware that every reader brings their own imagination to the book, which is much more frightening. During Christie's and Sayers' times, the murder mystery was almost like a parlour game. But Wilkie Collins, who wrote *The Moonstone* [arguably, the first crime novel], was very gritty and dark. With the advent of forensic sciences, crime-writing is coming full circle."

What violence there is serves a purpose, says Walters.

"One of the things I do deliberately is to reveal the murder in the first few pages, which makes my books appear deceptively brutal. This is to remind people about the horror of murder. It's the ultimate theft – you can never give a life back." Her narratives are interspersed with e-mails, letters and photos, which make them even more convincing. "I do this as a way of making them more realistic, almost like a documentary."

Connie, like most of Walters' heroines, is tough to the point of ruthlessness. "I grew up reading crime thrillers like Alistair McLean and Hammond Innes, and was always annoyed that it was men who were solving everything and rescuing damsels in distress. I was quite determined that my women weren't going to be eclipsed, either as heroines or murderesses."

Walters is known for the twists and turns of her stories, which often end ambiguously. Yet, she says she doesn't plot her books.

"I just think of an idea, create really good characters, and then let them write the story". She says she still doesn't know if Olive Martin, the protagonist of *The Sculptress* was a murderess or not.

Many of her novels deal with crime and punishment, and Walters has been a prison visitor for several years.

Her grandfather, Joshua Jebb, was Surveyor General of British prisons during the mid-19th century, and helped introduce a number of reforms – a subject that Walters feels strongly about. "It seems to me bizarre that things should remain unchanged since the time my grandfather visited. For instance, 50 to 75 per cent of the prison population is illiterate. We need to teach them how to read."

And she says she believes there's unnecessary hysteria about crime in Britain, especially about paedophilia. "I think the tabloids just like to stoke up fear because it makes for a good story. The truth is that most victims are murdered or molested in their own homes by people who know them."

Is literary snobbery stopping crime writers from getting their due? Two of Walters' peers, James and Ian Rankin, recently called for crime fiction to be considered serious writing worthy of literary awards. Speaking at the Cheltenham literary festival, they argued that modern crime writers deal with important contemporary social issues, but are still less well regarded.

"I deliberately reveal the murder in the first few pages, which makes my books appear brutal"

Walters isn't convinced. "I'd love a crime novel to get a prize, but I can quite see why they haven't. We write in a different way, usually on contemporary issues and in a page-turner style. A literary novel is on a much bigger canvas and may take years to write. As for getting enough respect, I think everybody likes to read a good crime novel, including the serious literary authors. Perhaps they read us surreptitiously – within brown paper covers."

Walters has served on juries for the Orange and Whitbread prizes (for women worldwide and by British residents, respectively), which she says was "great fun and very hard work". She says she has some reservations about a special prize for women, "but anything that encourages great writing has to be a good thing".

Walters' next project is a crime novel for Quick Reads, a programme established by Unesco to publish books for adults with reading difficulties. It's a fictional version of a murder that happened 80 years ago. And she plans to keep testing the boundaries of her genre.

"What I liked about the Sherlock Holmes novels was that they told you everything you wanted to know about Victorian London. If somebody buys my books at a jumble sale in 50 years time, I like the idea that they might get a flavour of what our times were like."

The Minnette Walters Season, *BBC Prime, Tues, 9.30pm (*The Echo *final episode this week;* The Dark Room *begins Dec 6)*

WRITER'S NOTES

Genre Crime fiction
Latest book *The Devil's Feather* (Macmillan)
Next project An unnamed mystery for Quick Reads, a project for adults with reading difficulties
Age 56
Born Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, Britain
Family Married to Alec Walters; two sons, Roland and Philip
Lives Near Dorchester, Britain
Other works *The Ice House* (1992), *The Sculptress* (1993), *The Scold's Bridle* (1994), *The Dark Room* (1995), *The Echo* (1997) *The Breaker* (1997) *The Shape of Snakes* (2000), *Acid Row* (2001) *Fox Evil* (2002), *Disordered Minds* (2003), *The Tinder Box* (2005)
Other jobs Secretary, magazine sub-editor and editor
What the papers say "Walters has succeeded in uniting the traditional crime narrative with a distressing and effective account of the private cruelties that can flourish amid general mayhem. In doing so, she takes the genre to a deeper level" (The Independent)

AUTHOR'S BOOKSHELF

Small Island by Andrea Levy
"It's well-written, it's funny, it has everything."

Red Dragon by Thomas Harris
"It created Hannibal Lecter, the most iconic figure in crime since Sherlock Holmes."

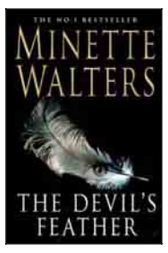
Innocent Blood by P.D. James
"It's about the estranged daughter of a murderess who seeks to be reunited with her mother. One of James' few one-offs. I always prefer one-offs."

The House on the Strand by Daphne du Maurier
"This came out in the 1960s, just when LSD was emerging, and Du Maurier very cleverly blends hallucinogenic experiences and time travel."

The Power and the Glory by Graham Greene
"My all-time favourite novelist. I love the agony and moral angst of his characters. This is about a 'whisky priest' in 1930's Mexico, on the run from a state which has outlawed the church."

review of the week

FICTION



The Devil's Feather
by Minette Walters
Macmillan, $189
★★★½☆
Gillian Bickley

I beg you to read this book twice – then let me know if she did it or not.

No one who follows the news will be ignorant of the war in Iraq, the mistreatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison or the kidnapping of female journalists. So this novel's opening events aren't likely to be rejected as unrealistic. Similarly, exposes in recent years about the questionable nature of some newsgathering and the fabrications of some journalists adds piquancy to this account by a female war correspondent of what she says happened to her.

The Devil's Feather has a delightfully ambivalent final section. Gradually, seeds are sown to make us doubt the narrator's account of the final events. Once this happens, everything she's told us becomes questionable. We begin to wonder whether her name, Connie Burns, is a broad tip that she is, in fact, a con.

Suspecting an Irish mercenary (Keith MacKenzie is one of his names) of serial rapes and killings, Burns pursues him. MacKenzie realises she's on his trail and arranges her kidnapping. He sexually assaults her and video-tapes the attack.

Set free, traumatised, Connie heads for England, where she rents remote Barton House and lives a reclusive life – befriended by a neighbour, Jess Derbyshire, who's said to be a predatory lesbian – still hunting for evidence to convict MacKenzie of his crimes. Connie also tries to find out why Lily, the elderly owner of Barton House, now confined to a mental institution, was found on a cold night some months previously lying near the fishpond in her grounds. MacKenzie again tracks down Connie, and there's a violent scene during which she and Jess overpower him. But when the police arrive, the body is gone. Did he escape and fall off a cliff? Did the women murder him and hide the evidence? Eventually, MacKenzie's arm is found in the sea. Is it a coincidence that this follows a police hint that only a body with salt in the lungs would justify a "drowned" verdict?

Apart from anything else, the book is a literary treasure hunt. Jess, living in Dorset, echoes Thomas Hardy's Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, who was also a south country girl. Unrecognised, each is related to prominent local families. And each is presented as morally more worthy than their socially superior relatives. The lovely Madeleine, the villainous daughter of Minette Walters' sub-plot, comes in for the sort of dislike that George Eliot shovelled onto pretty women in her novels.

The final point – that in fighting evil we need to avoid becoming evil ourselves – is an irony in the style of both these 19th-century English novelists. There are also echoes of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. Both Connie and Clarissa become anorexic after their rapes. In its use of e-mails and wire agency reports, *The Devil's Feather* gives a modern twist to narratives told through the correspondence of the characters.

Several sore points about the British way of life provide additional material, as well as fuelling the plot. Is it reasonable that householders' rights to protect their property and individuals' rights to protect their lives are so tightly circumscribed? Should non-British residents have free access to the British National Health Service? Is it fair that an old person's property should need to be sold to finance their residential care? Is the role of the likely heirs necessarily that of villains?

The Devil's Feather will appeal to different groups of readers: and in some ways is two books for the price of one. The first and second reads will be different experiences.