A FITTING FINALE: RUTH RENDELL'S *DARK CORNERS*

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Abstract

The paper provides an analysis of crime writer Ruth Rendell's last, posthumously published novel, *Dark Corners*. It compares and contrasts the work to the author's previous stand-alone psychological thrillers, examining prevailing themes and motifs, typical settings, principal characters, plotlines and resolutions, as well as tone and style of writing. Human weaknesses and hypocrisies, delusional obsessions and compulsive murderous urges are dealt with, as is the role of social circumstances, interpersonal relations and modern-day fads in determining various aberrations from the generally accepted norms of human behaviour. The writer's use of biting irony and black humour in the investigation of this dark subject matter is also commented upon. The study establishes that, with this book, Rendell – consciously or not – provides readers with a thorough recapitulation of her thematic and moral concerns in the non-series strand that she herself claimed to prefer, thus delivering a fitting finale to her literary career of over five decades.

Keywords: ***psychological thriller, suspense, murder, guilt, twists of fate, irony.***

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A proud legacy. At the time of her death in 2015, British writer Ruth Rendell had had seventy-five novels, novellas and collections of short stories published, both under her own name and her pen-name Barbara Vine, and had accumulated a staggering number of literary awards, both for genre writing and mainstream fiction. What fans of Baroness Rendell did not know at the time, however, was that they were in for one ultimate treat: late 2015 witnessed the posthumous publication of the author's very last novel, *Dark Corners* – a novel which, on analysis, can serve as a perfectly neat and suitably ironic summation of the writer's lifelong thematic and stylistic probings. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what about this work makes it a near-perfect swan song for a writer whose career spanned over seventy years.

The title. Throughout her career, which started in 1964, Ruth Rendell maintained two chief strands of writing: more traditional whodunits in the police procedural mode featuring Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford and his sidekick Detective Mike Burden, and stand-alone novels, novellas and short stories most often labelled as psychological thrillers or suspense stories by critics and publishers. (This second strand eventually led the author to launch a third byline as Barbara Vine in 1986, resulting in longer, less-genre oriented novels which, however, still shared the thematic concerns of the non-series stories.)

It was the stand-alone strand that Ruth Rendell herself said she preferred, and it was also the strand which brought her the first of her many awards. Within it the author, free from the constraints of the conventional murder mystery, was free to subvert, break or at times completely abandon the norms of traditional detective fiction. (It is a well-known fact that the writer was forced despite her wishes into the crime genre, when her first publisher informed her he would only accept her debut novel on condition that she turn it into a detective story – hence the birth of Chief Inspector Wexford.)

The stand-alone works do feature crime (usually murder), but rarely contain a whodunnit element and, even more rarely, any investigation. There is no brilliant

detective gathering clues or eliminating suspects, and any police involvement is more likely than not to result in the torment of innocent individuals. Rather, these stories are about crime waiting to happen, the mystery being when it will happen, where it will come from, and who will fall victim. The greatest mystery, though, is what has led to this crime, and how it will affect the criminal, as well as anyone else who, due to circumstances, is involved in it. Ruth Rendell's thrillers are psychological in that they explore thwarted minds or minds slowly coming undone, and the author's success can be attributed to her realistic portraits of psychopaths or, even worse, seemingly sane people evolving into psychopaths.

In other words, the writer built a career out of probing and dissecting the dark corners of the human psyche. Which is why it is perfectly fitting that her last novel, *Dark Corners*, should belong to her stand-alone strand, and that its title could eerily suit any, or even all, of her works, including even the supposedly conventional Wexford novels (the first of which, *From Doon with Death*, turned out to revolve around an obsessive lesbian stalker turned killer – and that was in 1964).

On the other hand, *Dark Corners* seems to be a rather bland choice for a writer whose gleefully obscure titles often have one reaching for the Dictionary of Quotations, or just any English dictionary – *to Fear a Painted Devil, A Guilty Thing Surprised, An Unkindness of Ravens, Put On by Cunning, or Kissing the Gunner's Daughter*, to name but a few. The truth is revealed about halfway through the novel, and it is not that Rendell ran out of options – the phrase is part of a quote from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, used here to refer both to the personality of one of the more unsavoury characters, and to the pockets of sinister secrets and imminent dangers that London, a favourite setting of the writer's, is full of.

Setting, characters and plotline(s). Certain similarities, in terms of both content and form, can be detected in Ruth Rendell's stand-alone tales. The *setting*, typically a specific area of London, is of paramount importance, as the characters are, in theory at least, part of some – most

often neighbourhood – community. These *characters*, although eccentric, are basically easily recognizable people who, behind their public personae, harbour some form of emotional disturbance. When their individual obsessions – for if there is a blanket theme to Rendell's works, it is obsession – inevitably clash, madness comes to the fore and violence erupts. The *plot* of a Rendell stand-alone will typically contain a number of apparently disconnected storylines which at some point, thanks to a particular event or quirk of fate, intersect, with murder and mayhem ensuing. The *atmosphere* is one of growing unease as the writer explores *topics* like mental disorders, delusional obsessions, dysfunctional families, class hypocrisies and conflicts, and the overall insanity of contemporary life.

The setting of *Dark Corners*, as already noted, is London with its various crescents, lanes, and groves, described in copious and loving detail. Ruth Rendell has not only established herself as a leading cartographer of London, whose descriptions of different areas of the city you can safely use as guidelines in place of a map, but has also made a particular setting the protagonist in some of her works: Regent's Park in *The Keys to the Street* (1996), Notting Hill in *Thirteen Steps Down* (2004), or Portobello in the eponymous novel of 2008. In the crime novel, writes Julian Symons, as opposed to the detective novel, setting is often 'important to the tone and style of the story, and frequently an integral part of the crime itself, i.e., the pressures involved in a particular way of life lead to this especial crime (Symons, 1993, p. 93).' With her unerring ability to observe even the smallest detail, Rendell, like all good writers, uses setting to convey a sense of place, build up a particular atmosphere, and enrich characterization. In her work, setting may be a central character in itself or may serve as a means of entrapment for a character, as well as a motivator for a character's actions.

The chief setting in *Dark Corners* is the house in Falcon Mews, Maida Vale, that the (anti-)hero of the novel, Carl, inherits, along with its contents, from his father. It is this house, and said contents, that will eventually bring about Carl's undoing and cause him to kill another human

being. For he has no way of knowing that the diet pills he finds among his father's old medicines will prove lethal, or that Dermot, the singularly unpleasant tenant he has taken in to supplement his income, will prove to be an adept blackmailer despite his professed devoutness. As often happens in Rendell-land, one wrong decision sooner or later leads to another, and another, until the wrongdoer is sent on an unrelenting downward spiral.

When Stacey, the friend Carl sells some of those slimming pills to, dies, this takes us to a different setting and sets off a new storyline. Lizzie Milsom, a friend of Stacey's, decides she prefers the latter's flat in Pinetree Court to her own rented bedsit in Kilburn, and moves in under false pretenses – having no idea that, with her new upscale address, she might become a target for kidnapping. Ruth Rendell has always delighted in probing the disparities in attitudes and behaviours between the different strata of British society and has a field day with Lizzie, who is not only a home invader, but a compulsive liar and small-time thief as well, and who feels somewhat entitled to bettering her living environs by whatever means possible. As the overall narrative meanders between the locations of Carl's and Lizzie's storylines, a third subplot is introduced which further enables the writer to explore the nooks and crannies of sprawling London: Lizzie's father, Tom, has taken up a new pastime since retiring, which consists in researching the city's bus system with his new free transport pass. Every day he takes a different bus to see where it will take him and what adventures it might bring his way, a hobby he jealously guards for himself, refusing to take along any other family member on these daily trips. Thus, as she juggles the separate plotlines, the author builds up a vibrant, multifaceted picture of London, where anything could happen, at any time – and most often does.

As can be seen from the above, Ruth Rendell takes pleasure in depicting quirky characters that often border on the grotesque, and placing them in unexpected situations borne out of either their own ill-conceived actions or of some bizarre twist of fate. (There are those who con-

sider that her work sometimes contains too many weird coincidences; however, it is worth remembering that it was precisely such a coincidence that led her to become a writer, after she was made to resign as a journalist for submitting a story about a local sports club dinner that she had not actually bothered to attend, thus failing to mention that the after-dinner speaker had died midway through the speech.) In *Dark Corners*, Rendell is quick to signal the first, and most important, such coincidence at the very beginning of the novel, when Carl contemplates throwing away his father's old medicines and decides he cannot be bothered:

> If he had known how it, or one particular item among the rest, would change his life, transform it, ruin it, he would have emptied the lot into a plastic bag, carried the bag down the road and dumped it in the big rubbish bin. (Rendell, 2016, p.1)

Strangely enough, Hutchinson's, the publishers of all of Ruth Rendell works, have decided to preface their edition of *Dark Corners* with excerpt from a 2005 interview given by the author for the *Daily Telegraph*, where she says she feels pity for her psychopaths. This is a familiar sentiment, expressed by Rendell in numerous interviews – for she believed that to comprehend the act of murder you first had to understand the underlying motives, desires and impulses. And it is true that she has portrayed outright socio- and psychopaths in her work: take the serial killer antagonists of *A Demon in My View* (1976) and *The Rottweiler* (2003), neither of whom feels any compunction about the crimes they commit, both focusing mainly on trying to work out what brings out the murderous urges they find hard to control, or Eunice Parchman, the nondescript housekeeper of *A Judgement in Stone* (1977), arguably Rendell's most unpleasant creation ever. Eunice guns down the entire family she is employed by, her motive being that she wants to conceal the fact that she is illiterate, and the author describes her in no uncertain terms as an 'atavistic ape disguised as twentieth-century woman (Rendell, 1978, p. 7),

Carl of *Dark Corners*, however, is no psychopath or serial killer. His first victim, his friend Stacey, dies purely accidentally as she takes the slimming pills Carl sells to her, which neither of them know can be dangerous when the dose is exceeded. (If anyone is surprised that a slimming pill can provide the narrative thrust for a crime novel, they should read Rendell's *Portobello* (2008), where a secret addiction to a sugar-free sweet leads to lies, deceit, and an explosion of violence.) Carl is shocked to learn of Stacey's death, but it is his inability to face the role he played in it that brings his weakness to the fore, and ultimately results in his moral disintegration. The New York Times Book Review calls *Dark Corners* diabolical in its exploration of 'one person's devouring of a weaker person's identity' and is quick to point out that Carl is 'just the sort of weak-willed milquetoast Rendell enjoys tearing into little bits (Stasio, 2015).' As with most of Rendell's wrongdoers, Carl's first reaction is to start looking for excuses in an attempt to exonerate himself.

> He had done nothing wrong; in fact he had been doing her a favour as far as he knew. It wasn't his fault that she had taken an overdose of the pills. She could have checked them on the web. The label had advised using care. (Rendell, 2016, p. 44)

And if one excuse does not work, another can always be found in its place: 'Really, the whole situation was his father's fault. He had died of a heart attack, and one of the websites had said DNP could damage the heart. Could it be…? (*ibid.*, p.45)'

Carl's failure at pacifying his conscience, however, will prove to be just the beginning. More serious torment is to be brought his way courtesy of his increasingly sinister lodger, Dermot McKinnock. This shifty-eyed, yellow-toothed character who likes snooping around other people's belongings and spouting pious platitudes, has not only overheard the conversation between Carl and Stacey, but also actually witnessed the sale of the pills – a fact he now decides to use to his advantage, suggesting that in return for not going to the police with what he knows, he

should stop paying rent. Dermot sees nothing wrong, or criminal, about this plan:

Carl had called him a blackmailer. Dermot hadn't liked that. Not at all. […] You could almost say he was the reverse of a blackmailer, because instead of taking money from Carl as the price of his silence, he was withholding it. He had never disliked Carl, and didn't now. To dislike anyone would be unchristian. To love your neighbour as yourself was a tenet of his faith, and Dermot was proud of loving himself a lot. In any case, there was nothing in the Bible about blackmail. Or reverse blackmail. (Rendell, 2016, pp. 64-5)

The character of Dermot provides Ruth Rendell with the opportunity to investigate yet another mentality that seeks to find an excuse for morally wrong behaviour, and to take a swipe at pseudo-religious fervour, as she does in a number of previous works – *Written in Stone*, 'The Astronomical Scarf', 'Myth'. Above all, it serves as the perfect catalyst for Carl's growing anxiety and nervous agitation, as he firmly refuses – despite his girlfriend Nicola's urging – to consider going to the police himself and telling them about his role in Stacey's death. So, Dermot is obviously here to stay, for free – and stay he does. Not only that, but having found a girlfriend of his own (of sorts), he starts bringing her over and together they gradually take over the house and the garden. Carl starts to obsess over Dermot, lying awake at night unable to think of anything else but his lodger's presence. 'This torment will go on for ever, for the rest of my life,' he laments. 'I shall live in this house or another house and he will be there with me, wherever it is. He will never go and I can't get rid of him. Sometimes I think I'll kill myself.' (Rendell, 2016, p. 113)

In the end, Carl does not kill himself – but he does kill Dermot. It is not a carefully planned, ingeniously conceived action, as it is in many conventional crime or detective stories. Murder in itself, or the means by which it may be committed, is not that interesting, Rendell stated repeatedly in her lifetime. 'It is the impetus to murder, the passions and terrors which bring it to pass and

the varieties of feeling surrounding the act that make of a sordid or revolting event compulsive fascination,' the author wrote in the introduction to her *Anthology of the Murderous Mind* (Rendell, 1996, p. i). In other words, the main question in her thrillers is not so much *who* or *how*, but *why* – a question her killers often ask themselves after they have done the deed. It is not a question that occurs immediately to Carl, though, as he opens his backpack to take out the present he has suddenly decided to give to Dermott, then brings it down hard on the latter's head with a bone-crunching blow. Then comes the *why*, but it is a different kind of *why*: 'He thought, why did I never think of doing it before? For months I've been desperate to get rid of this awful threat, this burden. He felt no guilt, no regret. He felt relief.' (Rendell, 2016, p. 166)

It is to be a short-lived relief, however. In Ruth Rendell's worldview, committing a murder must surely be a terrible burden to the perpetrator – and that burden is another major focus of her psychological explorations, as the realization dawns upon her killers that they have crossed a line from which there is no coming back, and the guilt starts eating away at them. (Not for her the more misanthropic outlook of Patricia Highsmith, who seemed to have mainly respect and admiration for her cunning psychopath Tom Ripley, and devoted a whole series of books to him.) Little by little, Carl is beset by remorse:

For a while [he] had convinced himself that what he had done was not important. But gradually guilt and shame had arrived, as well as not so much a fear of discovery as a fear of some kind of retribution for his wickedness. […] When his guilt was known, when everyone knew, perhaps he would no longer be haunted by it. But it was with him now and inhabited his body like his heart did. It slept with him and woke with him, it lived with him like an organ. It would never leave. (*ibid*, pp. 216-7)

Ruth Rendell's murderers are often so overwhelmed with guilt that they are actually glad when they are caught by the police – as eventually they are, for the author may let some of her characters get away with lies, deceit, or treachery, but never murder, the ultimate crime. Char-

acters who welcome or even arrange for their arrest are portrayed in novels such as *Live Flesh*, *The Rottweiler*, and *Thirteen Steps Down*. *Dark Corners* takes things a step further and has Carl do what no Rendell character has done before – go to the police and confess. This makes for an ending to the novel that is deeply ironic, bearing in mind that he could have done so immediately after learning of Stacey's death, and would have thus avoided becoming a true murderer.

Laughter in the dark. One final aspect that makes this novel the perfect finish to Ruth Rendell's career is the strong vein of humour that pervades it. 'I very much enjoy making things funny [...] I want my books to have a lot, an element of laughter in them,' the author once said in an interview (Rendell, 2003). Even the bleakest of her thrillers have a humorous vein running through them, and this vein became even more apparent in the novels published in the last decade of her life, which read more like comedies of manners, or errors, infused as they are with subtle irony and black humour.

'From the impressive variety of tones and styles to which she had access as a writer, Rendell chose for *Dark Corners* black comedy that echoes Muriel Spark,' writes Mark Lawson in his review for the *Guardian* (Lawson, 2015). The novel is written in a matter-of-fact, even breezy tone that seems to bring little if any menace to the overall narrative, yet menace there is, quietly bubbling beneath the surface, as the reader eventually comes to realise. For all that it features one accidental death, one murder, one kidnapping, one savage beating and one narrowly averted terrorist attack, the book also contains enough instances of comic relief to give readers the impression that they are caught up in a joke, though of the darkest kind. There are Carl's pathetic attempts to console himself with the mantra that what he has done was little more than an accident; Dermot's perverted logic when it comes to justifying his actions with what is, or is not, said in the Bible; Lizzie's relief when she learns, while lying bound and gagged, that one of her abductors is not making a ransom demand on the phone but is talking to his husband (gay men wouldn't

rape a woman, she reasons); Carl's use of the ornamental green goose gifted to him by Nicola as a weapon to bash Dermot's head in; Lizzie's rescue from captivity by a giant pigeon hitting and smashing the window of the room she is locked in; and numerous other anecdotal incidents that both take the reader by surprise and raise more than an appreciative smile. All of which goes to show that, in Rendell's worldview, even the darkest corners have unexpected whimsical glimmers of light.

The last word. Circumstances, as can be seen from above, played a significant part in Ruth Rendell's work; they obviously did so in her life, as well, as *Dark Corners* was finished and ready for publication quite some time before she suffered the stroke in early 2015 that would bring about her death. She could not have known this would be her last novel ever, but in a number of ways it was uncannily fitting that it proved to be. Firstly, it belonged to her favourite strand of writing, the stand-alone psychological thrillers. Secondly, its overall content may well serve as a reflective recapitulation of all the major themes she had tackled in her previous output, and the motifs and devices she employed in order to explore them. There is the looming setting, or variety of settings, the atmosphere of growing unease, and the broad cast of loners, misfits and losers, some of them verging on the grotesque; there is also the concordance of seemingly mundane events which send the (anti)hero on the way to moral disintegration, and eventually murder; there is, finally, the abundance of seemingly disparate plotlines which at some point converge into a single on-the-edge narrative, heading for disaster for most of those involved. Last but not least, this is all served up in a farcical manner that once again illuminates the author's sceptical view of modern life and her tongue-in-cheek attitude to everything her keenly observant eye subjected to close scrutiny. In a nutshell, it is a novel that is quintessentially Rendellian, and may well be a handbook on all her work in the thriller vein.

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