

## **An Exploration of Postmodern Villainy in Selected Novels of Ian Rankin**

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**Abstract:** Crime fiction enjoys widespread popularity among readers. Ian Rankin's crime fiction is peopled with psychopaths, schizophrenics and monstrous villains and serial killers whose intrusion and presence informs the widespread social and emotional meltdown in the world. His novels stand as a good example of historical resonance, social critique and symbolic communication. The spectacle of victim bodies and crime scenes are symptomatic of the trauma and social insecurity of the postmodern era. There is very little research that has gone into studying the postmodern characteristics that perpetuate crime. Research has also indicated that the postmodern influences hidden beneath the monstrous activities requires rigorous probing. While probing into the question of how serial killing serves as a testament to the potential of crime fiction to engage with serious literary and cultural questions while maintaining the narrative

momentum and reader engagement, this study is also a direct response to the neglect of the postmodern phenomena underlying the true crime fiction of Ian Rankin.

**Keywords:** Crime Fiction, Postmodernism, Serial Killers, Social Critique, True Crime

Ian Rankin is one of the best crime writers of Scotland. His novels are set in the city of Edinburgh and he is best known for his *Inspector Rebus Series*. It has achieved a prominent place in Scottish crime fiction. In all his works, he has evidently portrayed the dark sides of Edinburgh and a few of his works are inspired by true events. I chose to study three works of Ian Rankin, namely, *Hide and Seek* (1991), *Black and Blue* (1997), *The Falls* (2001).

*Hide and Seek* is based on a real life scandal of male prostitutes who bribed judges and lawyers. *Black and Blue* mirrors the Bible John case. Bible John is an unidentified serial killer who is believed to have killed 3 women in Glasgow. *The Falls* too is inspired by historical events. It acquaints us with the most notorious body snatchers of Scotland, William Burke and William Hare who snatched up 17 victims in Edinburgh over the years 1827 and 1829.

The scope of exploring postmodern phenomena is huge in these novels. A handful of research has gone into commenting on Rankin's ability to document life in Edinburgh and the dark sides of the city. Christopher J. Ward in *It's Hard to Be a Saint In the City: Notions of City in the Rebus Novels of Ian Rankin* explores the depiction of Edinburgh throughout the Rebus series and how Rankin chronicles in real time the physical changes made to Edinburgh. Agnieszka Sienkiewicz in *Genre Mixture in Ian Rankin's Detective Fiction* finds that novels by Rankin are marked by the concern with nation and history as well as psychological observation.

Critical material on Rankin is limited. In Martin Priestman's *Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, we have references to Ian Rankin in a chapter on Post war crime fiction. Chapter thirteen of *A Companion to Crime Fiction* edited by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley titled *The Police Novel* written by Peter Messent contains merely a paragraph about *The Naming of the Dead* talking about the Scottish political and cultural context contained in the book.

### **Ian Rankin and True Crime Fiction**

The proliferation of true crime fiction reflects a fundamental characteristic of postmodernism: the replacement of grand metanarratives by local narratives, as Jean Francis Lyotard's theoretical framework suggests, where micro-narratives provide a more detailed picture of fragmented society while grand narratives hold very little credibility (Zahid et al. 259). True crime fiction exemplifies this shift by focusing on individual cases rather than overarching theories of justice or social order. The emergence of true crime fiction as a dominant cultural form in the postmodern era represents more than mere entertainment—it reflects fundamental shifts in how contemporary society understands truth, authority, surveillance, and narrative itself. This phenomenon intersects with the literary achievements of authors like Ian Rankin, whose works embody distinctly postmodern characteristics while engaging with the darker realities of contemporary life. By examining both the broader cultural context of true crime's popularity and the specific postmodern elements in Rankin's fiction, we can understand how these works are instrumental in tracing the complexities of the current period.

True crime fiction have become normative in the postmodern world because they perfectly embody the era's defining characteristics: skepticism toward authority,

fascination with surveillance, fragmentation of grand narratives, and the blurring of boundaries between reality and representation. These narratives thrive in a cultural moment characterized by information overload, moral ambiguity, and the constant circulation of mediated stories about violence and transgression.

Ian Rankin's work exemplifies the postmodern crime novel's sophisticated engagement with these themes. His fiction demonstrates postmodern characteristics through its ethical complexity, rejection of simple moral categories, integration of professional and social critique, and its position within both local Scottish identity and global literary culture.

The convergence of true crime culture and postmodern literary techniques in authors like Rankin suggests that crime fiction have become essential tools for understanding our contemporary moment. They offer ways of processing the anxieties of surveillance culture, the collapse of traditional authority structures, and the complex ethical challenges of modern life, making them not merely popular entertainment but crucial cultural forms for navigating postmodern existence.

### **Serial Killers in the Postmodern World**

In Mark Seltzer's *Serial Killers: Life and Death in America's Wound Culture*, serial killers are identified as a by-product of a postindustrial era where the technology and media create an identity crisis. According to Seltzer, the fascination with violent spectacle is represented in their own fragmented society. In the article titled *Serial Killing and the Postmodern Self*, Anthony King contributes immensely to this discussion. He interprets serial killing as a form of commodified transgression and how they establish themselves in the postmodern world. Serial killers transcend the institutional controls of the state. Hence, they fail to suppress their internal drives. A

somewhat similar finding has been put forward by Jon Stratton in *Serial Killing and the Transformation of the Social* (2015). He examined the generic constructions of serial killing in modernity and postmodernity and the differences between them. He places these constructions in the context of the modern emergence, and postmodern transformation of the social. Stratton affirms that the discourse of serial killing positions it as art in a spectacular world where the distinction between art and life has been erased.

My argument is that several distinctively modern phenomena, including identity crisis, media, broken past and other such factors contribute to the incidence of monstrous acts like murders. In doing so, I draw attention to the postmodern characteristics evident in the select novels of Ian Rankin and my analysis draws from the extensive literature on brutal killers. Kevin D. Haggerty in *Modern serial killers* made an exhaustive research on the broader social, historical and cultural context of murderous acts and also enunciates the parameters of what it means to exist as a serial killer in the modern world. These parameters include media, celebrity status and identity. Grant Cook in *Literary Serial Killer Fiction: The Evolution of a Genre* (2017), walks us through the postmodern influences of serial killer fiction. He talks about the proliferation of serial killer fiction but fails to give a clear answer as to why serial killer fiction continues to enjoy popularity in the postmodern era.

Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus series shows the intersection of postmodern literary techniques with contemporary crime fiction. While the available academic literature does not extensively address serial killers specifically within Rankin's work, his novels demonstrate key postmodern characteristics that have transformed crime fiction from traditional detective stories into complex explorations of moral ambiguity, social critique, and narrative fragmentation.

### **Postmodern Elements in *Hide and Seek*, *Black and Blue* and *The Falls***

Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus novels represent a significant contribution to contemporary Scottish literature and exemplify the evolution of detective fiction in the postmodern era. The three novels examined here—*Hide and Seek* (1991), *The Falls* (2001), and *Black and Blue* (1997)—demonstrate how Rankin employs postmodern narrative techniques and thematic concerns to subvert traditional detective fiction conventions while engaging with broader socio-political issues within contemporary Scotland.

There is disruption of linear narrative structure, uncertainty and moral ambiguity, questioning of genre conventions, intertextuality, cultural critiquing, socio political commentary, urban fragmentation and genre hybridization that beg attention in the selected texts. Postmodern detective fiction subverts traditional detective story conventions through techniques such as metafiction, parody, and intertextuality (Jadega and Barad 568)

The authors should be able to open the eyes of the reader to the struggles of the real world. They should not force the readers to retreat from the struggles and mayhems by masking the truths with sweet assurances and positive assumptions. Good does not always win in today's crime fiction. At the same time, evil cannot always be rationalised. Sometimes villains make a clean escape, and in many cases we are encouraged to take sides with the criminal thereby evading the powers of law and order. This perspective, articulated by Eleanor Bell in her analysis of Rankin's ethics, encapsulates the postmodern rejection of absolute truths and moral certainties that permeates all three novels. In *Black and Blue*, the investigation becomes increasingly complex as Rebus confronts not only external criminal elements but also corruption

within his own institution. Rankin refuses to provide neat, comprehensive solutions that explain all aspects of criminal behavior and social dysfunction. In *The Falls* particularly, the resolution of the central mystery fails to address the broader systemic issues that enabled the crimes, reflecting postmodern skepticism toward totalizing explanations.

Rankin's novels demonstrate the subversion of traditional detective stories through their self-conscious examination of the detective genre itself. The character of Rebus often reflects on the limitations of police work and the inadequacy of traditional investigative methods, creating a metafictional commentary on the genre's conventions.

Rankin employs intertextual strategies that reference Scottish literary tradition, popular culture, and political history. *Hide and Seek* particularly demonstrates this through its engagement with Scottish cultural mythology and contemporary social issues. The novel's title itself suggests a child's game that becomes deadly serious, reflecting the postmodern tendency to blur boundaries between playfulness and gravity, innocence and corruption.

The representation of extractive industries generates motifs of concealment and revelation, superficiality and depth that have particular resonance in the face of police investigations conducted by Rebus, which are characterized by the uncovering of dark truths (Leishman). Moreover, by connecting these themes to energy sources that are determinant to the development of the industrialized world, and to Scotland's history since the 1970s, they highlight the links between commercial, political and social issues. This observation about the Rebus novels' engagement with Scotland's industrial and political transformation illustrates how Rankin uses the detective fiction framework to explore broader postmodern concerns about capitalism, globalization, and national

identity. Leishman asserts that Rankin himself cites Rebus as a “great tool for [the] dissection of society”.

Edinburgh stands as a character in Rebus novels. Rankin's use of the city as a character-albeit mentally disordered- allows the reader to attain an insight into the city that even an actual visit would not reach (Phillips 101). Unlike the English Golden Age detective who flitted from country house to rural vicarage, the original gumshoe plied his trade on the mean streets of cities such as Los Angeles, New York or San Francisco, Rankin's Edinburgh novels adapt this urban focus to the postmodern context, presenting the city as a fragmented, multilayered space that resists easy comprehension. The three novels present Edinburgh not as a unified, coherent space but as a collection of competing narratives, hidden histories, and conflicting interests.

In *The Falls*, Rankin employs multiple temporal layers and narrative perspectives while readers expect a chronological narration of the events. *Black and Blue* through its layered treatment of Scottish history, connects contemporary crimes to deeper historical patterns of violence and exploitation. The novel refuses to present a linear historical progression, instead offering multiple, sometimes contradictory perspectives on Scotland's past and present.

### **Serial Killing in *Hide and Seek*, *Black and Blue* and *The Falls***

The novels *Hide and Seek* (1991), *The Falls* (2001), and *Black and Blue* (1997) demonstrate Rankin's sophisticated engagement with the phenomenon of serial killing as both a narrative device and a means of exploring deeper societal concerns. The role of serial killing in these three novels extends far beyond mere plot mechanics, functioning instead as a vehicle for examining the psychological, social, and historical dimensions of violence in contemporary Scotland. Through his treatment of serial



killers, Rankin engages with broader questions about the nature of evil, the persistence of historical trauma, and the ways in which past and present violence intersect in the urban landscape of Edinburgh and beyond.

*Black and Blue* presents perhaps the most complex treatment of serial killing out of the three novels taken for this study. Inspector Rebus has been posted to one of Edinburgh's toughest sectors and his is to follow the trail of Johnny Bible who has taken over the notorious serial killer Bible John who terrorized Glasgow in the 1960s. The character of Johnny Bible serves as both a contemporary threat and a symbolic continuation of historical violence. This novel demonstrates Rankin's technique of weaving historical true crime into contemporary fiction, creating a narrative that spans decades and explores the persistence of violent patterns across generations. The novel's treatment of serial killing reflects what scholars identify as crime fiction's capacity to engage with historical trauma.

The complexity of *Black and Blue* extends beyond its treatment of serial killing to encompass broader themes of corruption and institutional violence. Crooked oil workers, gangsters and corrupt police officers make their presence in this novel. Thus explaining how serial killing serves as a focal point for exploring the interconnected nature of various forms of violence and corruption within Scottish society.

In *Hide and Seek*, the second novel in the Rebus series, Inspector Rebus finds the dead body of a drug addict in an Edinburgh squat. The manner in which the body was laid out on the floor and the presence of candles on the crime scene signals that the person died not of an overdose rather it was a ritual violence.

The ritualistic nature of the murders in *Hide and Seek* serves multiple narrative functions. The symbolic arrangement of bodies and occult imagery suggests that the

killer is attempting to communicate through violence, using murder as a form of symbolic expression. This approach to serial killing emphasizes the psychological dimensions of violent crime, moving beyond simple criminality to explore the ways in which killers construct meaning through their actions.

The novel's engagement with Edinburgh's drug culture and social marginalization demonstrates how serial killing functions as a lens for examining broader social issues. The use of symbolic and ritualistic elements in the murders serves not merely as atmospheric detail but as a form of narrative communication that requires interpretation by both detective and reader. This approach elevates serial killing from mere plot device to a form of symbolic language that must be decoded to understand its deeper meanings.

*The Falls* presents a particularly sophisticated treatment of serial killing through its integration of historical and contemporary elements. A museum curator alerts Rebus about the possibility of the emergence of a serial killer connecting contemporary murders to Edinburgh's dark historical past. A carved wooden doll in a coffin found near the missing woman's home leads Rebus to the National Museum of Scotland's collection of dolls in coffins found on Arthur's Seat in 1836. The novel's treatment of historical resonance is particularly evident in its connection to the Burke and Hare murders. This historical layering serves multiple narrative functions. First, it establishes Edinburgh itself as a character shaped by its violent past, with contemporary serial killing emerging from the same urban landscape that witnessed historical atrocities. Second, it suggests that patterns of violence persist across time, with contemporary killers drawing symbolic inspiration from historical precedents. The carved wooden dolls function as a bridge between past and present, suggesting that the serial killer's methodology deliberately echoes historical crimes.

## Conclusion

Ian Rankin's *Hide and Seek*, *Black and Blue* and *The Falls* exemplify the adaptation of detective fiction to postmodern sensibilities and concerns. Through fragmented narratives, ethical ambiguity, metafictional self-consciousness, and the rejection of simple resolutions, these novels demonstrate how contemporary crime fiction can engage with complex social and philosophical questions while maintaining accessibility to popular audiences.

Each work demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between historical and contemporary violence. Whether through the Bible John connection in *Black and Blue*, the Burke and Hare resonances in *The Falls*, or the occult historical context in *Hide and Seek*, Rankin consistently presents serial killing as a phenomenon that emerges from and reflects historical patterns of violence. Rather than presenting killers as incomprehensible monsters, Rankin's works suggest that serial killing emerges from specific social and psychological contexts that can be understood and analyzed. Third, the novels demonstrate a consistent concern with the symbolic dimensions of violence. Whether through the ritualistic arrangements in *Hide and Seek*, the historical echoes in *The Falls*, or the generational patterns in *Black and Blue*, Rankin presents serial killing as a form of symbolic communication that reveals deeper truths about Scottish society and its relationship to violence.

These works ultimately demonstrate that postmodern detective fiction need not abandon the fundamental pleasures of crime narratives—suspense, character development, and social observation—but can instead enrich these elements through self-conscious engagement with the genre's conventions and limitations. In doing so, Rankin's novels provide both entertainment and serious commentary on contemporary

Scottish society, exemplifying the postmodern synthesis of pleasure and critique that characterizes the most successful contemporary genre fiction.

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