

FICTION

NEIL DONNELLY

Nun better: The red-haired, horse-riding, nun sleuth from 7th Century Ireland... at the Sister Fidelma festival in Cashel.

Picture by Michael McDonald



ALL HAIL SISTER FIDELMA

THE CHALICE OF BLOOD
PETER TREMAYNE
(Headline, £19.99)



Sister Fidelma of Cashel first appeared in short stories in 1993, and in the following year the first novel, *Absolution by Murder*, appeared. Almost every year since then there has been a new Sister Fidelma murder mystery and the books have won a huge and devoted international following. At the last count they had been translated into 18 languages.

What gives this series set in 7th-Century Ireland such global appeal is the brilliantly researched historical background and the uniqueness of the Fidelma character. As well as being a religieuse and detective, she is also a trained advocate of the ancient Irish legal system – the Brehon Laws.

This system was considered the most advanced in the ancient world at a time when women were regarded almost on an equal

footing with men. Sadly, they were trampled underfoot during the reign of Elizabeth when women 'were put in their place'.

The Chalice of Blood is the 21st novel in the series. Like all good murder mysteries, the set up is simple. A famous scholar is found murdered in his cell in the Abbey of Lios Mor. His door was locked from the inside, with no other means of exit. How did the murderer escape? And what was the content of the manuscripts stolen from the scholar's room?

The abbot can think of only one

person who might be able to unravel the mystery, so Fidelma is sent for. She travels on horseback, accompanied by her constant companion, Brother Eadulf, but just as they reach the abbey there is an attempt on their lives. So the forces against them are formidable and the odds of Fidelma's achieving a satisfactory conclusion seem stacked against her.

Of course there is a formula at work here, but the pleasure is in the world Peter Tremayne has created and into which we can escape. Fidelma is a feminist with a cool brain – a nun with a male companion. Brehon times were so much more liberal.

It has been said that Fidelma carries on in the tradition of Ellis Peter's *Brother Cadfael* books, familiar from the 1990s TV series with Derek Jacobi. Fidelma devotees in America and elsewhere have wondered why no production company has yet taken the plunge with this character.

So after 21 books, does the formula hold up? Yes.

Because the author keeps inventing great new stories. Does the writing hold up? Yes. An example is the first chapter of 'Dancing with Demons' in which the king's murder on the Hill of Tara combines brilliant imagery with savage detail like that found in a Jacobean tragedy.

Fidelma is not *Murder, She Wrote*, although there is a slight similarity in the way both the Angela Lansbury character and Fidelma are treated with respect and listened to.

It is not *Midsomer Murders* where the bumbling John Nettles stumbles by accident upon the resolution. Fidelma doesn't do bumble or stumble, she just uses laser logic. If you like a good mystery, cleverly plotted and beautifully written, and have not yet discovered Fidelma, a treasure trove awaits.

An added bonus is the fascinating reconstruction of 7th-Century Ireland by the author, a noted Celtic scholar under his real name, Peter Beresford Ellis.

Such is the devotion of the Fidelma fans that she now has her own bi-annual festival. The third Feile Fidelma takes place in Cashel from September 10 to 12 this year and among the events planned is a rehearsed reading of a stage adaptation of the short story *Invitation to a Poisoning*.

Actress Caroline Lennon, who reads the Fidelma books for CD, will be reading the Fidelma role, and the heroine will once again put the bumbling males to shame. For further details, see www.cashelartsfest.com.

THRILLERS

Myles McWeeney

TIGERLILY'S ORCHIDS

RUTH RENDELL
(Hutchinson
£18.99)



Duncan, a retired breakdown rescue mechanic, spends most of his days watching the comings and goings of his neighbours in Lichfield House, the small block of flats across the road. In Number 6 there's alcoholic Olwyn Curtin; lonely academic bachelor Maurius, in Number 3; New Age herbalist Rose Preston Jones in Number 2; students Noor, Mollie and Sophie in Number 5; and a vain and naïve young man in Number 1, Stuart Font.

Stuart is obsessed with Duncan's neighbour, an exotic and reclusive young Chinese woman he has nicknamed Tigerlily. Then there's the creepy caretaker Mr Scurlock and his brassy wife Rosalind. Stuart decides to give a flat-warming party, inviting all his neighbours, which sets in train a series of tragedies that eventually lead to a murder.

Now in her 81st year, Ruth Rendell, creator of the hugely popular *Inspector Wexford* series of police procedurals, is one of Britain's most prolific mystery writers. In addition to 22 *Wexford* tales, Rendell has written 25 stand-alone psychological thrillers and, under the pseudonym Barbara Vine, a further 13 novels. *Tigerlily's Orchids* is proof positive that age has not withered this keenly observant octogenarian's ability to spin an atmospheric and disturbing tale while savagely skewering British lower middle-class pretensions.

BLACK DIAMOND
MARTIN WALKER
(Quercus, £20)



Bruno Courreges is the easy-going Chief of Police in the little town of St Denis in France's beautiful Périgord region. He is shocked when Vietnamese neighbours are savagely attacked and their market stall wrecked. The perpetrators appear to be Chinese, and Bruno fears his quiet village is seeing a Viet-Chinese triad war. When a close friend, a veteran of France's colonial past, is brutally murdered, Bruno must move fast to solve a crime that threatens the very future of his community. Martin Walker's delightful *Bruno* series makes you want to buy a ticket and immerse yourself in la France Profonde.