

The Devil's Feather **By Minette Walters**

(Macmillan, £17.99)

With nary a false step, Minette Walters has been burnishing her reputation as one of the most powerful yet nuanced practitioners of the psychological thriller, and *The Devil's Feather* will do her reputation no harm. Actually, Walters' winning streak has been continuing for an unfeasibly long time, with each succeeding book slightly more ambitious than its predecessor. Walters has been building a total picture of modern Britain that cuts across all social strata, while still using the apparatus of the crime novel. Since pocketing the Creasey Award for her debut novel, *The Ice House*, in 1992, such books as *Fox Evil* and *Acid Row* have demonstrated Walters' assurance with a variety of social groups (upper middle class or council estate), while *Disordered Minds* reached into darker areas of the human psyche. And now the unthinkable is being quietly whispered: has Minette Walters hijacked the title of Britain's crime queen from long-time joint holders Ruth Rendell and P D James?

The Devil's Feather is solid fuel for this argument – not least because Walters has tackled a more ambitious international panoply than before. Five women have been savagely killed in Sierra Leone, and Connie Burns, who works as a correspondent for Reuters, expresses doubts when three youthful rebel soldiers are arraigned for the crimes. But her objections are disregarded – this is, after all, a murderous civil war in which the slaughter has been wholesale, and the fate of three brutalised children forced into phoney confessions is academic. Connie comes to believe that the killer is a foreigner with sadistic sexual predilections, cutting his own bloody swathe under the cover of a war-torn country. But her attempts to track down the killer in Iraq have horrifying results for Connie, and she escapes from her prey-turned-predator back to England, humiliated, her mind and body pushed to their extremes. Burrowing into seclusion in Dorset, Connie knows all too well that her safety is fragile, and that a final, horrific confrontation is inevitable.

All of this couldn't be further from the cosy Home Counties mystery that gently comforts the reader; Walters is in the business of disturbing us, but not merely out of a desire to shock. As ever, truthful characterisation is paramount (Connie is a fully-rounded, conflicted heroine with whom it's impossible not to identify), and there are truths spoken here about what war does to societies, and about the English social conscience (Connie is a prime possessor of this attribute).

Most refreshing of all, however, is Minette Walters' readiness to tackle larger themes than her more parochial English peers. For some time now, American crime writing has been built on a larger scale than that forged on these shores: the canvases more continent-spanning, the characters more voracious in their appetites, the stakes generally higher. It's apparent that Walters has decided to strike out into this more demanding arena (and why, after all, should the Yanks have exclusive rights to this territory?). There may be moments when Walters seems to have bitten off more than she can chew, but she always keeps the narrative momentum of *The Devil's Feather* cranked up to a fierce degree, and her heroine, the beleaguered Connie, is the perfect conduit for the reader through a dangerous landscape.

Like the other Brit queens of crime, Rendell and James, Walters has always been read by men (other female crime writers often target a female readership only); but with this book, she resolutely joins such American specialists in the extreme as Tess Gerritsen, whose books feature female protagonists in scenarios that are perfectly tough enough for the most astringent male tastes.

BARRY FORSHAW