

# Mistress of crime

Picture: BARRY GOMER

By Richard Dismore

**T**HE QUEEN of Crime, Minette Walters, has a new book out. Be afraid – be very afraid. This time the lady famous for an imagination that's as savage as it is fertile has excelled herself.

If Inspector Knacker were to yank open the squeaky-hinged door of the potted shed, his torch beam would reveal nothing less than the dark heart of Africa.

The Devil's Feather is the story of a serial killer, a sadistic rapist who carries out his attacks under cover of the chaos of the civil war in Sierra Leone. A feisty young woman Reuters correspondent suspects the truth and becomes his next terrified target.

Ms Walters's theme is what happens when social order breaks down and the lunatics get the run of the asylum. The idea came to her when she saw first-hand the aftermath of the killing spree by government troops and rebel child soldiers in Sierra Leone.

She could hardly have believed that such a vision of hell would play itself out on our television screens just a week before her book was published and that the hell in question would be New Orleans.

"The first thing I thought was, my God, the minute the social order breaks down and authority loses its grip the most appalling things happen," Ms Walters says, in an

## 'No one would insure me'

exclusive interview with the Sunday Express.

"Soon after I got back from Sierra Leone there was Abu Ghraib and the constant onslaught of what has been going on in Iraq.

"I was looking up rape figures in Iraq and, while Saddam Hussein was in power, there was about one rape a month and now the figures are up in the thousands. It's a weapon of intimidation, I think. So all those things came together and that's where the story came from."

Ms Walters rates the trip to Sierra Leone, as the guest of one of her favourite charities, Médecins Sans Frontières, as one of the most interesting things she has ever done. Certainly it must have been one of the scariest.

"We went everywhere in 4x4s and everyone was incredibly security-conscious," she says. "I knew it was still dangerous because, when I went to get insurance to go there, absolutely no one would insure me. "In order to get the rebels to give up their weapons after the war, they were offered money in exchange for handing in weapons. It quickly became something of a scam because they were all nipping across the border and buying weapons and then coming back and getting more money.

"We were told, 'You can always tell an ex-rebel because they'll be riding a motor bike.' That's what they all spent their money on.

"They were known as the West Side Boys – very brutal, and they did



BRAVE: Minette travelled to war-torn Sierra Leone to do research for her book *The Devil's Feather*

## Exclusive: Author Minette Walters talks about the dangerous journey she undertook for her latest novel

look tough these guys, riding around on motorbikes."

Minette Walters talks about the new book – her eleventh full-length novel – in the magnificent surroundings of her 18th-century listed manor house near Dorchester in Dorset. It is clearly her pride and joy. As she leads the way down a Portland stone-flagged corridor to a glass conservatory – "our own Kew Gardens," she calls it – she describes the restoration she and her husband Alec have carried out.

She also betrays a writer's insecurity, saying that she could always rent out one wing of the house and the guest cottage in the grounds "if it ever goes pear-shaped". Somehow that doesn't seem likely. The Devil's Feather is a title to tickle the fancy. And Ms Walters owes it, she admits, to an old friend.

It was originally a Turkish phrase meaning a woman who stirs a man's interest without realising it. "Isn't it grand?" she says. "It was given to me by my friend Liz Merry. She and I shared an attic flat in our last year at Durham University. I met up with her after a break of about 20 years.

**W**E WERE talking over lunch about someone else and she said, 'Oh, of course, she's the devil's feather.' And I said, 'What does that mean?'

She gave me the definition and I thought it was fantastic so I said, 'I'm going to nick that.' After a bit of pressure she agreed to let me use it.

"Actually, when you think about it, any victim of a stalker is a devil's feather. Poor Jill Dando had

absolutely no idea that revolting man was interested in her but she was exciting him to a pitch."

Two of the characters in the book are named after fans who agreed to contribute to the author's cherished charities. "I'm always rather pleased when people do this," says Ms Walters. "It saves me from having to think up the names myself.

"I try to avoid the names of my family and friends as far as I possibly can because I don't want them to think I'm setting them up as psychopaths in a book."

She does reveal, however, that the appearance – though not the monstrous personality – of the villain in *The Devil's Feather* is based on an aid worker she met in Freetown, Sierra Leone – "cruel, really, because he was so nice".

Minette Walters, novelist, is also

an atheist, a socialist and a feminist as well as a former writer of romantic fiction and magazine editor. Remarkably, her first five books were all adapted for television, with such actors as Miranda Richardson and Clive Owen among the casts.

One of her ancestors, Joshua Jebb, was Inspector General of Prisons and helped the great reformer Elizabeth Fry to have many of her ground-breaking changes accepted. Ms Walters wonders if she hasn't inherited Jebb's reforming genes and, between books, is herself a prison visitor.

"People always assume it is to do with research. I don't deny it has been very useful in that respect. You either get hooked by it or you don't."

"But it's extraordinarily interesting. I find that the backgrounds of people in prison are so similar. What you'll find is that 33 per cent can't read or write at all and another 33 per cent are semi-literate.

"Why we don't recognise this absolute relationship between illiteracy and crime I simply don't understand. Jeffrey Archer said – and I couldn't agree more with him – that we should make learning to read and write part of the sentence so that if they do learn their terms can be shortened."

Unusually among crime writers, Minette Walters doesn't have a central character that she carries from book to book, such as Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse.

"I took on board what Conan Doyle said, that he hated Sherlock Holmes

## 'I really am very rebellious'

enough to kill him and Agatha Christie always wanted to kill Hercules Poirot – but they weren't allowed to by their publishers.

"In any case, I really am very rebellious and if I tried to write a series I'd be bored stiff with the people I was writing about. So I decided I was going to do what Ruth Rendell did and write one-offs and I'm so happy that's what I did."

Ms Walters is reluctant to name her favourite modern crime writers, but she will admit: "The author with the most incredible imagination was Bram Stoker – he invented Dracula, one of the most iconic figures of the past 130 years.

"Thomas Harris with Hannibal Lecter is another one. There's this extraordinary, attractive in a funny sort of way, dangerous psychopath. A fantastic piece of imagination."

She also loves Agatha Christie's work but adds: "Murder wasn't frightening in her stories. It wasn't supposed to be. In fairness, it was a sort of parlour game – before telly you sat and read an Agatha Christie of an evening and it was audience participation. Was the reader going to stick it before Christie told them?"

"But I always thought that was slightly wrong because murder is the ultimate theft. You can never atone for somebody else's life, it can never be given back."

● *The Devil's Feather* (Macmillan, £17.99) is out now. You can read more about Minette Walters on [www.minnettwalters.co.uk](http://www.minnettwalters.co.uk).