

A Case of Mistaken Identity

An Analysis of Ruth Rendell's Novel *An Unkindness of Ravens*

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This crime story is one in the series of Ruth Rendell's very popular Wexford novels and was published in 1985 as her 28th book. She was and is a prolific writer; since the publication of her first work *From Doon with Death* in 1964, she published at least one book per year. The name for her protagonist occurred to Rendell after a trip to Ireland, and initially two names were in the running, Wexford and Waterford. She selected Wexford, as she is fond of names that include the letter "x".

Rendell's production can be divided into three genres. Her first novel introduced the character of Inspector Wexford and the fictional southern town of Kingsmarkham which represents a microcosm of society. Her second book was the first of her crime thrillers not to contain the presence of Wexford. Rendell alternated these two series until 1986, when, under the name of Barbara Vine, she published her first psychological novel, *A Dark-Adapted Eye*. The Vine novels differ from the Rendell ones as they feature deeper psychological characterization and a more sustained social critique.¹

Ian Rankin said, "There is a tension within her – there were things she couldn't do in a Wexford book so she invented Barbara Vine. Her Vine novels often discuss the bizarre nature of London – the haves and the have-nots walking in the same park but never meeting."²

According to Wilbur Smith, Rendell suffers from the tag of being a detective novelist. "She has developed into a very good novelist, not just a crime novelist. It's pure sexism – everyone knows that women can write detective fiction, so they're allowed to succeed at it." The same is certainly true for P D James who once said that the structure of the crime novel suited her, and that she could be a serious novelist within its boundaries. Both authors took the crime novel far beyond its traditional confines and developed it into something much more ambitious.

Throughout her books, Rendell shows an interest in outsiders, influenced by her experience as a child, growing up in Britain with an English father and a Swedish mother, who, during the Second World War, people would look at with suspicion, thinking her to be German.³

Rendell is a convinced Labour supporter and she is not afraid of defining her political views as 'socialist'. Rendell's progressive political views are reflected in her novels which try to innovate a fundamentally conservative literary genre. She writes mysteries in the vein of a social critic who observes and exposes social inequality, racial and sexual discrimination, and gender bias.

Rendell subverts the traditional conventions that are usually associated with crime fiction and which make the detective instrumental to the restoration of order in a society momentarily upset by the chaos brought about by crime. Inspector Wexford, whose liberalism is confronted with the conservatism of his deputy, Mike Burden, turns criminals over to justice. Yet, Rendell insists on realism and strives to characterize her detective as an ordinary person rather than a glamour figure. In addition, the truth that Wexford's investigations bring to light indicts traditional and conservative beliefs as responsible for the crimes that have been perpetrated.

Murder and transgressions of law are always linked in Rendell's books to social injustice. The portrait of 'middle England' emerging from her novel is

one where traditional values connive with class differences, racism and sexism to stimulate, rather than to keep in check, the irrational desires that will lead people to kill.

Although Rendell's stand-alone novels are more directly concerned with social and political issues than the Wexford novels, the inspector's enquiries are not simply general searches for a metaphysical truth, but are always rooted in current debates such as feminism, racism, environmental preservation, labour exploitation, domestic violence, female circumcision, the arrival of new immigrants from Africa to Britain, and pedophilia.

Rendell's real interest is in human motive and the aspects of society that make criminal behaviour possible. Crime writers have always explored not only man's deepest nature but the nature of society itself.

Contrary to more traditional inspectors, Wexford is by no means infallible and, in spite of his liberalism, is sometimes hostage to the same social conventions which he exposes as harmfully wrong. The novel presently under discussion gives ample evidence of that.

In an interview, Rendell once observed,

“Wexford's opinions are mostly my opinions, so he is a lot like me. The things he says are the kind of things I would say. So when I am writing about him, I am not creating a character so much as putting myself as a man on the page.”⁴

She more or less confirmed this in another interview with Libby Brooks:

“I just had to have an investigating officer in the first book. I didn't do anything much about him, but gradually I realized that I was stuck with him and so I made him more liberal, more literate, more interesting. I realized that

I had put an enormous amount of me – and to some extent my father – into him, but it may be that women creating a detective always put their fathers into them.”⁵

For this analysis, I concurrently used the Ballantine paperback printed edition and the Kindle electronic version (based on Arrow Books, 1994). The book has 344 pages divided into 23 chapters.

It tells the story of a man, a bigamist with two families, who becomes the victim of a vicious murder. The story is a straight narrative and progresses in linear fashion without parallel strings of action, without flashbacks. The reporting is done chronologically with the author uninvolved, but acting as the omnipresent and omniscient voice.

The story is developed to its climax by the end of chapter 21. The remaining two chapters are used to throw light on the plot and to tie up all the loose ends. This is done by Wexford in a chat with his second-in-command, detective inspector Burden, in an old-fashioned style reminiscent of Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot assembling all suspects in a drawing room so that all may be revealed and the culprit unmasked, except that the culprits are known already, and it is more a tying up of loose ends, so that the missing pieces of the puzzle finally fall into place.

It is one of the strong structural points of the novel that the reader is indeed still very much in the dark when the final arrests are made. There were all sorts of scenarios and suspects floating about, but the reader must admit that he was led on.

There are a number of sub-plots and ancillary events which serve the purpose of confusing the reader as well as partly justifying the construction of the plot. Rendell has frequently been accused of mincing current – and not so current – events into her narrative, sometimes overlooking the fact that they were

getting a bit dated, even at the time of writing. Word processors, for example, were already fairly commonplace tools when they finally appeared in her work. In this particular novel, Rendell is guilty of some embarrassing name-dropping. She mentions Apricot and Apple computers which have no bearing on the case at all, since manual typewriters still prevail. However, she cannot resist mentioning the golf ball and daisywheel technology used in electric typewriters, if only to make the detectives (and her readers) aware that, with such modern technology in place, the typewriter as a piece of evidence in a murder investigation would be a non-issue. In another book, she had obviously discovered the blessings of air-conditioning, and the book is crawling with references to hot weather and cool interiors. When Rendell was made a life peer in 1997, this experience was immediately exploited in *The Blood Doctor* (written under her *nom de plume* Barbara Vine).

In an internet profile for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Imogen Russell Williams wrote under the heading “Ruth Rendell should give up trying to be modern”

“... that she tells a great story, but her fictional world has become period drama in bad modern dress.”⁶

Similarly, other writers and reviewers have taken Rendell to task for a perceived failure to keep up with the times. In his review of *A Site for Sore Eyes* (1998), Nicholas Blincoe, referring to the use of drugs, among other things, pointed out that

“Rendell ... knows nothing of youth culture: neither of the 90s nor, even, of the 60s. And her invented youth culture is far more peculiar than the mundane reality.”⁷

It is a chastening thought that a lot of the great crime fiction of yesteryear would simply not work in the days of computers and cellphones. When Robert Ludlum's *Bourne* trilogy was made into movies, the second volume had to get a completely new plot as the original was hinging too heavily on old-fashioned technology, and Hong Kong had ceased to be a British colony.

The sub-plots in this novel deal with feminism, with incest, and with in-vitro fertilization, admittedly all strong and controversial issues, certainly in the mid-eighties and perhaps even now. Two of them have a direct bearing on the plot development, while the third one is clearly a diversion. Some latter-day hippies and their cannabis-smoking offspring are also involved, albeit indirectly. However, their house is a kind of safe haven for feminist meetings and the garden is the backdrop for some unsettling discoveries.

Feminism is represented by a mysterious and slightly sinister movement that calls itself ARRIA. The plot in fact only works because the crucial statement which leads to Wexford's barking up the wrong tree is made from a feminist point of view. Coming from an ordinary person it would not have been plausible.

Incest is introduced by way of a play in which Wexford's daughter is acting on stage (Shelley's *The Cenci*)⁸, but it seems to have some bearing on the motive for the murder.

The in-vitro fertilization concerns detective inspector Burden and his wife who chose this method to get pregnant and who had to struggle with the ramifications of their decision. It contributes nothing to the plot.

Rendell placed hints and diversions in great numbers throughout the book, sometimes discounting them quickly herself, and sometimes letting them stand uncommented. There are a lot of circumstantial suspects, and some deliberate ones that Rendell goes to great lengths in establishing and framing as such. Sometimes she uses suggestive language to drag the reader into her

webs of suspicions and half-truths, but there is nothing sneaky or underhanded in Wexford's firm belief of being on the right track in suspecting the murder victim's two wives.

The story starts with a missing person. Wexford got to hear about it unofficially as he was a neighbor. At first he did not take it seriously as in many such cases the missing persons turn up again within a few days.

In chapter 2, the first inconsistencies and suspicions appear. The missing man used to be a sales rep and was then promoted to marketing manager, a fact that his wife was unaware of. As sales rep, he was permanently on the move; as manager, he worked from an office, but his lifestyle did not reflect this fundamental change. Eventually he quit his position, again without his wife's knowledge. This suggests that there is method behind his disappearance.

In chapter 3, the reader learns that Rod's car, a Ford Granada, was found abandoned on a road not far from the railway station. In a talk with Rod's superior, the police established that he made £25,000 per annum and sent a letter of resignation in which he specifically asked not be contacted. As the police found out, the letter was typed on a Remington 315 typewriter and addressed to "Mr. Gardner", although he and his boss had been on a first name basis. Again, this is a strong hint that something is not quite right.

Rod's wife Joy produced bank statements which showed that £500 had been deposited into her account every month. This suggested the existence of a second bank account into which his salary was paid by his employer.

Chapter 4 provides more hints. Joy made a sly and only thinly disguised remark about her daughter's promiscuousness, and Wexford found evidence of Sara's strange interests in her room, not least her membership in ARRIA.

Wexford drew further conclusions about the preferential treatment enjoyed by Sara's brother Kevin (he had the larger room, and was allowed to attend university).

This chapter also revealed a minor continuity glitch in Rendell's story: on page 54 in chapter 4, Wexford wondered if Rod would not have taken his driving license if he had intended to go away for good, but until then no license had ever been mentioned, and it is not clear at this point whether there is a license in Rod's desk or not. Consequently, the paragraph was deleted in subsequent editions, including the Kindle version.

Another suspicious circumstance is that Rod did not own a typewriter, so it is not clear where – and by whom – the letter of resignation had been written.

In chapter 5, a wounded man was found at a bus stop, and a pond that had been drained and dragged by Mid Sussex Waterways yielded a travel bag containing Rod's clothes, money and a kidney donor card which identified Rod as the owner of the bag. The person who found it lived just two houses down from the Williams family on the same street. Wexford and Burden established various theories and entertained speculations of what might have happened, all of them intended to confuse the reader.

Chapter 6 reveals that a female person claiming to be Joy Williams telephoned her husband's workplace a day after he disappeared and said he had influenza and could not come to work. A second stabbing occurred, again the victim was male and the attacker female. Further, the bank manager confirmed that Rod had three accounts, one at Kingsmarkham, which his wife had access to, and two in Pomfret. Into one of them his salary had been paid, but what of the other one? The bank manager was not prepared to give more details. Finally, a retired policeman walking his dog in the woods found a body in a shallow grave.

Chapters 7 and 8 yield information about the identity of the victim – it was Rod – and the manner of his death. He was first drugged and then stabbed several times. The cause of death was the pierced carotid artery, suggesting the possibility of a link with the other stabbings. The next of kin were informed.

Burden told Wexford that his wife had had an amniocentesis and that the unborn child would be a girl. This information had thrown Jenny Burden into a fit of depression and she declared that she could not contemplate a future with an unwanted daughter.

There was some confusion at the constabulary about a Mrs. Wendy Williams, whom Wexford took to be the wife of Rod's brother who was living in Bath.

In chapter 9 at last it becomes clear that Wendy was also married to Rod (albeit not legally), and that Rod was therefore a bigamist maintaining two households whose members were not aware of each others' existence. This also explains the third bank account.

A witness called Eve Freeborn came forward. She could confirm that the Ford Granada had been at the location where it was found since 10 p.m. on April 15. It also turned out that she knew Sara.

When Wendy was told about Rod's other family, she supplied some details of Rod's technique of sharing his time between the two households. He invented a mother living in an old people's home in Bath whom he had to visit at Easter and Christmas. He also faked another job for himself. When Wexford met Wendy's daughter Veronica for the first time, he was struck by her appearance; she and Sara might have been twins.

In chapter 10, further evidence turns up, like Rod's driving license which he had left at Wendy's place although the address on it was the one of his other household. He apparently enjoyed taking risks. For the first time, we get substantial evidence of the meaning of ARRIA, which turned out to be a militant, feminist group. There were further interviews and further witnesses materialized, but there was no breakthrough yet.

Chapter 11 introduces some relatives of the Williams family. Joy Williams' sister Hope Harmer and her daughter were visiting when Wexford showed up for another interview. Mr. Harmer was a pharmacist. Wexford ploughed ahead

and repeatedly met with all witnesses and slowly turned up more evidence, among them a sample of Rod's handwriting. He noticed that the daughter of Rod's former boss, Mr. Gardner, was also wearing the ARRIA T-shirt.

At a visit to Eve Freeborn's house, Wexford realized that her parents had to be some latter-day hippies. There was a hint of marijuana wafting through the house, and the aura of the sixties pervaded it in terms of furnishings and decorative items. Eve's parents seemed to have another residence in London and were absent. Present were a number of young women, and Wexford realized that he had interrupted a meeting of ARRIA.

Now the story picks up momentum. We learn that ARRIA was named after Arria Paeta (as Wexford who had done his homework was quick to point out to his surprised audience), a Roman matron who had shown an act of civil bravery on behalf of her husband. It was also an acronym, standing for "Action for the Radical Reform of Intersexual Attitudes". The assembled women explained the goals of the society and that it had gained a foothold in most of the schools in the area. Wexford noticed that the manifesto always mentioned "women" rather than "members", which was an important clue whose significance he failed to understand for a long time.

In chapter 12, Jenny gave her opinion about the ARRIA manifesto. Being a teacher herself, she had heard of it but, being also married, had always been denied access to it. There were the first signs of a change of heart about being pregnant with a girl, and that she might yet be able to reconcile herself to the idea if there were people out there who took it upon themselves to change the role of women in society.

While musing with Burden and his wife about the significance of the raven's head in the logo, Wexford – seemingly inadvertently – shed some light on the title of the novel. He pointed out that the collective noun for ravens is an 'unkindness', (like a flock of sheep, a brood of chicks or a gaggle of geese), and

remarked that it was really quite an appropriate tag for the group.

The usage of ‘unkindness’ goes back a long time, being first recorded in 1452.⁹ The title is, therefore, simply “A group of ravens” and has only implicitly to do with the literal meaning of the term *unkindness*. The translators of this work likewise did not pick up on the proper meaning.

The Japanese and German titles, for instance, are complete misnomers. It was translated into Japanese as 無慈悲な鴉 (Unmerciful Ravens) and into German as “Die Grausamkeit der Raben” (The cruelty of Ravens). Perhaps the publishers thought that a title like “A Group of Ravens” would not have been catchy enough, but it stands to reason that they never recognized the usage of the word as a group noun, although it is explicitly mentioned in the text. The equivalent of “A Group of Angry Ravens” or just “Angry Ravens” might have worked as a title, though. The French title is rather more satisfactory: “Les corbeaux entre eux” (The Ravens among them) is certainly as ominous as the English title.

The “hippie mansion” was good for a few more surprises. Apart from a well-kept ornamental conservatory, Wexford discovered the cannabis plot at the bottom of the garden, in the only spot that got a sufficient amount of constant sunlight. Another more gruesome event had yet to happen, and its discovery was also connected with the same jungle-like garden.

After checking alibis, more than half of the membership of ARRIA was cleared, among them Paulette Harmer, Eve and Amy Freeborn and Caroline Peters, the sports coach of the local school. When Wexford interviewed Jane Gardner, he realized that she was the first person to say anything nice about Rod Williams. Her parents were upset that she was a suspect, and were “dead against” her daughter being fingerprinted. Here is another hint which is easily overlooked.

Shelley’s verse drama *The Cenci* was written in 1819, and inspired by a real Italian family. As the themes are incest, rape and patricide, the play was never

performed in Shelley's lifetime. Rendell cleverly used it to plant some clues. It is introduced into the novel as a play in which Wexford's daughter Sheila – who is an actress – will appear on stage. Part of the action of the play directly relates to the action in the novel, but at the same time, Rendell used some events of the play to lead the reader to connect them with the novel – which this reader certainly did.

Other routine police work included the taking of fingerprints, the checking of typewriters at Haldon Finch Comprehensive School and charging Eve Freeborn's father with the possession of cannabis. Wexford attended a tennis match which showed Veronica Williams to be an accomplished player.

When it came to the checking of the typewriters, Rendell could not resist to throw in her knowledge of the – then – latest developments in typewriters, i. e., the golf ball and the daisy wheel, although they had no bearing on the case. The machine on which the letter of resignation had been typed was an old manual model without exchangeable typeface.

In chapter 13, speculation about the stabbings continued, but was inconclusive. Wexford interviewed Wendy Williams, but when he suggested that she might have had an extramarital relationship, she violently denied it. More ARRIA members were cleared of involvement in the murder or the stabbings, schools broke up for the summer holidays, and the investigation was headed for another slump.

Other schools had their typewriter pools checked by the police, and again Rendell is guilty of name-dropping – this time of computer names and their manufacturers: Apple, Apricot, and Brother. Again, these devices were neither particularly new nor pertinent to the investigation.

There was no progress with identifying any kind of motive for the stabbings. It could not even be established whether they were aggressive acts or carried out in self-defense.

Chapter 14 opens with more red herrings in the course of the typewriter search. The firm of Ovington performed typewriter repair and maintenance services, and the junior director would turn out to be more involved than Wexford thought. The firm used a very obscure system of abbreviations for their customers' names which resulted in yet more distractions and wrong clues.

Then Mr. Milvey found a kitchen knife which might or might not have been the murder weapon. It was a common kitchen utensil, but in Kingsmarkham, it was only sold at Jackie's, the department store where Wendy Williams was a manageress.

Then another stabbing occurred, the fourth one. A man called Peter John Hyde was attacked on the bypass. Two officers in a parked police car heard his cries, and when they attended to him, a woman came out of the woodland bordering the bypass and handed them the assault weapon, a penknife with blood on it. Her name was Edwina Klein, a lecturer from Oxford and co-founder of ARRIA.

The story picks up speed again in chapter 15 when Edwina also admitted to knifing Brian Wheatley, the third victim. She claimed that Mr Hyde had behaved as though she was a prostitute, so her reaction had been in self-defense, although she had sought out the situation deliberately.

Upon leaving the police station, Edwina decided to set the record straight on the two Williams families. The police thought that they had not known of each other's existence, but according to Edwina, that could not be true, since she had seen them together. When asked to qualify that statement, Edwina repeated that she had seen "those two women" together. Wexford took this to mean Joy and Wendy, the two wives and mothers. This misunderstanding, based on the usage of "women", is a serious obstacle to finding the truth. The time of that sighting was established as the previous January, thereby preceding Rod Williams' death by several months.

In chapter 16, it turned out that there was some competition between Paulette Harmer and Sara Williams with regard to their A-level results. Sara wanted to become a doctor and had been provisionally accepted at a teaching hospital in London. Paulette wanted to become a pharmacologist like her father and needed fewer and lower A-levels, but Sara was unnecessarily patronizing and condescending about it.

Joy and Wendy Williams repeatedly denied knowing each other, but Wexford was convinced that they were not telling the truth. He relied on Edwina's statement to the exclusion of any other possibility.

In another interview with Mr. and Mrs. Milvey, Burden learned that the pond had been dragged on May 31, according to schedule, and that Mrs. Milvey might have said as much to Joy Williams, as it was all above board and no secret. This contradicted Wexford's assumption that Joy had been informed that the pond had either been dragged already, or was not going to be dragged until a much later date.

Why would anyone hide a bag in a pond if it was going to be found a few days later? The only reasonable assumption would be that it was dumped there *so that* it would be found without delay. But why would Joy behave so absurdly? This whole construct is yet another device to lead the reader up the garden path, as it were, and to focus his attention on irrelevant matter.

In his next interview, Burden talked with James Ovington who confirmed that an Olivetti typewriter belonging to the father of one of Veronica's friends, Nicola Tennyson, had been in for its annual overhaul. However, Ovington knew that the Tennysons had another typewriter. Mrs. Tennyson did typing jobs for other people on a semi-professional basis and needed another typewriter if one was being serviced. Mr. Ovington used this interview to admit that he had been getting friendly with Wendy Williams.

When Burden visited the Tennysons, the husband produced the Olivetti and

his wife confirmed that she had another portable typewriter. It was a Remington 315, and when Burden typed a sample sentence, there was a flaw in the apex of the capital A, in the ascender of the lower-case t, and at the head of the comma. So this was the typewriter on which Rod's letter of resignation had been typed, a true piece of evidence after many abortive attempts.

When Wexford and Burden tried to establish how and why Wendy could have had access to the typewriter, they realized that it did not make sense. There was simply no motive for her to have wanted to write the letter. If Wendy and Joy had known each other, Wendy also would have known that her marriage to Rod was not legal, and that she was therefore free to marry James Ovington at any time if she wanted to.

Since Rod had been stabbed to death after being drugged, the knife which had been found could have belonged to Joy or Wendy. Jackie's department store stocked those knives and Wendy worked there, but the whole neighborhood shopped there, so this connection was tenuous at best. Rather out of the blue, Wexford remembered seeing, in Rod's drawer, an estimate for the redecoration of Wendy's living room, a job that had obviously been done very recently. So he decided to follow up this lead and find out who had done it.

As this eventually leads to the discovery of a very important piece of evidence, the way in which Wexford "stumbles" upon it is actually rather lame and unconvincing. His thought was not provoked by what went on before, i. e., the identification of the typewriter. One would have wished for a more elegant connection.

In chapter 17, Paulette Harmer went missing. She had been out the previous night and not returned home. Her mother was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. She would have wanted to know where Paulette was at any given moment of the day or night, but since her daughter was eighteen and therefore legally grown-up, there was nothing she could do about it.

The person who did the redecoration of Wendy's living room was a Mr. Leslie Kitman. They found him working three houses away from Wendy's residence, and it turned out that, when he had come back for the third consecutive day, one of his dust sheets with which he had covered the furniture had been exchanged for another one not belonging to him. He had not noticed this immediately, as some of the sheets had been removed and folded up – Wendy and her daughter were actually living in the place whilst the redecoration was going on – but later he had noticed that one of the folded sheets was not his. He had asked Wendy about it but she had denied any knowledge of it. It had niggled him for a while, but as the total number of sheets was right, the thought had dropped from his mind.

A surprising turn of events occurred at the end of the chapter. While questioning Joy and Wendy again, Wexford was probing into the identity of Rod's girlfriend that Wendy had alluded to before. Joy denied the existence of such a girlfriend, "unless one wanted to count Wendy". Wendy insisted that there was a girlfriend, that she had not invented one, and suddenly Joy was overcome with emotion. She tripped up by asking Wexford if Sara had been talking to him, and Wexford, sensing some tension and playing it by ear, neither denied nor confirmed this, thereby provoking an outburst from Joy who admitted that her husband had not simply been attracted to any young girls, but to his own daughter.

Chapter 18 takes up the issue of incest, connecting it with Shelley's play *The Cenci*. When Sara had told her, Joy had not wanted to hear about it. She had mostly blamed her daughter, and had been more concerned about the reputation of her family than the physical and emotional injuries her daughter had suffered.

Wexford, still convinced that the two mothers were in cahoots with each other, brought them in for another questioning. He tried to find out how and when they had first met, but both women again denied knowing each other.

However, this time Wendy wanted to speak to him alone and then told him that she had had the same worry as Joy, i. e., that Rod might have had designs on her daughter Veronica.

Wexford then understood that on April 15 when she had had to work late, Wendy had wanted to get Veronica out of the house so that she would not have to face her father alone in case he returned home after the fight he had had with Wendy. But then he was trapped again in the same mind construct that Wendy might have wanted her daughter out of the house so that she and Joy could be alone with Rod (and murder him).

When Wexford talked with Burden again about motive, the women's motives seemed clear at last: Joy killed out of bitterness and jealousy while Wendy was motivated by fear that Rod would rape Veronica.

Wexford conducted yet another interview with Eve and Amy Freeborn and learned that, after an ARRIA meeting, Paulette had left with Edwina and her aunt, but after the two women had got into the aunt's car, Paulette was left on her own. Wexford noticed the conservatory outside the window and the Freeborn daughters offered to show it to him. They also turned on floodlights to illuminate the garden. It was a wilderness which reminded Wexford of an old cemetery. He walked along a path which the Freeborn family sometimes used as a shortcut to the High Street. When he followed the path further through the garden, past the gate, he tore his raincoat on some brambles and when he switched on his torch he saw the body of Paulette Harmer, arms outstretched, in the thicket.

In chapter 19, some important pieces of evidence finally come to light. Dr. Crocker confirmed that Paulette Harmer had been strangled. Wexford, going through Burden's notes of the interview with Leslie Kitman, the painter, realized that the timing would have been right to camouflage something in the living room, as it had been repainted immediately after Rod's death. The

missing dust sheet and Kitman's remarks that some of the blemishes in the walls might have been smoothed out by someone other than himself, added to Wexford's uneasiness. He was convinced that one of the women must have killed Paulette Harmer to conceal the provenance of the sleeping pills or to prevent her from telling the police about them. He decided to get a warrant to remove the new wallpaper and search the walls.

Burden was informed that Jenny had gone into labour and Wexford urged him to take his paternity leave. Wexford then went to talk to Sara one more time about the rape issue. He found her in the garage trying to mend a lawn mover. The spool cord, a thin red line of flex, was broken. She told Wexford that she was first raped by her father on November 5, and only one more time after that. She had seen to it that there was no further repetition.

Then he went to Wendy's house to oversee the removal of the wallpaper. While the work was going on, he questioned Wendy again how she could have known about Rod's advances to her daughter unless she had been told about it by Joy, and was surprised to hear that Veronica herself had told her mother.

A remark that Wendy had made about her daughter playing in the singles final at the tennis club that afternoon kept nagging Wexford, but he didn't even know what his hunch was about. While trying to work it out, he reiterated the whole story again, and was correct about the chain of events, but not about the persons involved.

After lunch the walls of Wendy's living room had been scraped clean. Some white patches on the bare walls were not Kitman's work, and in one of them police inspector Allison found a knife, wrapped in a newspaper.

As the plot grows thicker, more and more chapters (first chapters 14 and 15, and then chapters 17, 18 and 19 in a row) end with a cliffhanger, a remark or discovery intended to heighten the suspense.

In chapter 20, James Ovington provided Wendy with an alibi for the night

of April 15, claiming that she had been at his house, a fact which Wendy later confirmed. Apparently, she had not wanted to admit this to Wexford for reasons of propriety. Nevertheless, Wexford was not convinced. Later in the day, James Ovington turned up again, accompanied by his parents, who confirmed that Wendy had indeed been at their house on the evening of April 15. The elder Ovington not so much remembered the date as the fact that it had been the first Thursday after Easter.

As both Joy and Wendy had meanwhile realized that they had not yet been charged with any crime, they decided to refuse any further cooperation with the police. So Wexford was stuck, his suspicions had led him nowhere.

The next morning, however, after a good night's rest, he spontaneously remembered what it was that Wendy had said, and what it had reminded him of, and all pieces of the puzzle fell gently into place and he realized what a fool he had been in suspecting Joy and Wendy. But this revelation was for him only, the reader is still kept in the dark.

The post-mortem from Dr. Crocker stated that strangulation had been achieved with a fine, powerful cord, which Wexford immediately connected with the spool of the lawn mower. He thought that all evidence pointed to the two women, but that he would never make the charges stand up in a court of law. So he decided on laying a trap. He called Veronica and told her to come and see him after the match.

The chapter does not end with a cliffhanger this time, but with a different kind of surprise. Jenny, after a Caesarean section, had delivered a healthy child, but its name had had to be changed by one letter – from Mary to Mark. It was a boy after all.

In chapter 21, the scenario played out as Wexford had planned it. After a successful match, Veronica took the shortcut through the woods as Wexford had recommended, intentionally putting her in mortal danger. This gave Veronica's

assassin an opportunity for attack, and attack she did, but bloodshed could be averted by the policemen who had been shadowing Veronica all the way from the tennis club. In the end, Veronica and Sara were both arrested and charged with the willful murder of Rodney Williams.

Here the story ends, and true to form, Rendell gave the solution away in the last paragraph. The final two chapters are employed to show the reader how many clues he overlooked and how many times he was led astray.

Now that the development of the story has been established, let us look at the main strings of action, the sub-plots, the diversions, and their respective protagonists.

The tennis matches are necessary devices, as Sara and Veronica must have met under convincing circumstances. Veronica was younger and attended another school, so a sports club membership would be a plausible connection.

Rod's Ford Granada is a complex hint, while the place where it was parked is nothing more than a diversion. Based on the story Wendy had told him, Wexford thought that Rod had intended to drive to his second home in order to be alone with Veronica. He had in fact had a completely different assignation (which Wexford worked out only much later) but was forced to stand up the lady in question because he was overcome with fatigue after taking the drugs. The car had later been driven to Myringham by Sara, and parked in Arnold Road, where it was seen (and bumped into) by Eve Freeborn not half an hour later. The position of the car is described as being close to the station, thereby suggesting that Rod might have gone away by train.

The typewriter story was drawn out rather excessively, and the many suspects are mostly red herrings, but whoever typed the letter was automatically

implicated. By devising an amorous connection between Wendy and James Ovington, the story is a little more fleshed out. The owner of the typewriter is known to the reader, but the identity of the typist is not.

ARRIA is of course an absolute necessity, partly to justify the usage of “women” even in the case of mere schoolgirls, and also as a foil for Jenny Burden’s problems with being pregnant with a daughter. It also gives this story of bigamy and suspected incest a moral counterweight. The three other stabbings which have nothing to do with the story also fit into this feminist theme. They are fairly transparent devices to lure the reader into making connections that were not really there. They support the ARRIA philosophy and the stipulation of the manifesto that all members take a course in self-defense (and possibly take the life of a man as well).

The “hippie mansion” and its overgrown garden is necessary as an unsupervised meeting place for the members of ARRIA, for the growing of cannabis and as a final resting place for a corpse.

The draining of ponds and the discovery of the overnight bag and the kitchen knife, all by the same person, are diversions. The fact that the Milveys live only two houses down from Joy Williams is irrelevant. It is Mr. Milvey’s job to drain ponds, and in this capacity it is not surprising that he finds the bag and the knife. If it had been anyone else, it would have been suspicious. It is also natural that his wife talked about these events since she was professionally involved in her husband’s work.

Likewise, when the (first) knife turned up, Wendy did not become a suspect simply by working in the department store that sold it. Most people in Kingsmarkham did their shopping there, so anyone could have bought the knife.

Paulette Harmer was not a suspect because of an academic competition with Sara. She supplied the drug which, as a pharmacist’s daughter, she could

do easily, but what got her killed in the end was the knowledge of what had happened and her threat to tell it to the police.

Shelley's play *The Cenci* serves as a foil for the relationship between Rod Williams and his two daughters, with the proviso that it suggested more than what really happened in the novel.

Even Joy and Wendy were no convincing suspects after all, as neither had anything to gain from Rod's death.

The excessive mention of Rod's former company Sevensmith Harding and their home improvement products is also nothing more than a distraction. One wonders if the knife which killed Rod was in fact only buried in a wall in Wendy's living room so that Rendell could make another batch of Sevensmith Harding products cascade down the page.

In the following section, the endings of all chapters are listed. A page number in **boldface** indicates a cliffhanger, an event that jolts the story forward, while underlined page numbers indicate a diversion. Rendell is particularly devious at the end of chapter 10. It is clearly a diversion, but she suggests that it could be a clue. In a court of law, any attorney employing such a technique would have been accused of "leading" the witness.

End of ch. 1 (p. 13): Scene of domestic bliss.

End of ch. 2 (p. 30): Wexford's foreboding that the matter is not settled yet.

End of ch. 3 (p. 44): Joy's allegation of her daughter's promiscuousness.

End of ch. **4** (p. 58): The victim's clothes turned up.

End of ch. 5 (p. 74): Interview with the victim of the first stabbing.

End of ch. **6** (p. 89): Rod Williams' body is found.

End of ch. 7 (p. 100): Jenny Burden's baby will be a girl.

End of ch. **8** (p. 111): Wendy is Rod Williams' illegal second wife.

End of ch. **9** (p. 131): Veronica looks like Sara, they might have been twins.

End of ch. 10 (p. 153): Joy is not interested in the other Williams family. Why not?

End of ch. 11 (p. 175): The ARRIA Manifesto expects every member to kill a man.

End of ch. 12 (p. 196): Veronica's friend Nicola left her fingerprints on Rod's car.

End of ch. 13 (p. 210): –

End of ch. 14 (p. 220): The attacker in the 4th stabbing was Edwina Klein.

End of ch. 15 (p. 233): Edwina confirms that “those two women” knew each other.

End of ch. 16 (p. 248): –

End of ch. 17 (p. 261): Rod was not just attracted to young girls, but to his own daughter.

End of ch. 18 (p. 275): Paulette Harmer's body is found.

End of ch. 19 (p. 292): The murder weapon is discovered.

End of ch. 20 (p. 304): Jenny Burden's new-born baby is a boy.

End of ch. 21 (p. 317): Sara and Veronica are arrested for the murder of their father.

End of ch. 22 (p. 331): Wexford suggests that Rod never sexually assaulted anyone.

In the two final chapters (22 and 23), Wexford explains the chain of events to Burden and Dr. Crocker. Jenny is still in hospital and the three men are at Burden's grass widower's house. This meeting is a standard device in detective stories, like a letter of confession discovered after all other attempts of solving the crime had failed. It supplies the ins and outs of the plot, explains what was

incongruous or paradoxical, and puts the pieces together.

It was Sara and Veronica, who knew each other, not their mothers. Edwina Klein had described them as “the women” which put Wexford on the wrong track, not realizing that to a feminist, and a militant one at that, all females were women, not girls. Sara and Veronica met at a tennis match and probably worked out their relationship fairly quickly.

Wexford then delivers a psycho-profile of Sara, a girl with a big chip on her shoulder, because of her father’s refusal to let her attend university, because of her brother’s always getting the better deal, i. e., a larger room, a better education, and more affection from his mother. Sara is described as a psychopath and a solipsist, a person to whom no-one else mattered, who was completely self-centered. She soon started controlling Veronica, and, in an unfortunate *folie à deux*, they fueled each other’s insanity which eventually led to the murder of their father.

Sara and Veronica always spoke on the phone and met frequently. It was Sara who warned her half-sister of their father’s sexual proclivities, and Veronica told her mother, without disclosing her source. The two girls found strength in the fact that they had gathered all this information about their parents, and that nobody else was aware of it. Sara got from Veronica the admiration she craved, and Veronica from Sara the protection she needed.

Sara exchanged her father’s blood pressure medication for the sleeping pills (which Paulette Harmer had provided) while Veronica typed the letter of resignation at her friend Nicola Tennyson’s house, on her mother’s portable typewriter. And it was Sara who had phoned Sevensmith Harding to say that Rod would not come in to work.

Paulette did not have to die because she had provided the pills, but because she had followed the news, worked out the connection and had become a threat.

After Sara had drugged Rod – initially to prevent him from following up on

his designs on Veronica – things developed their own dynamics. Seeing her father helpless and drugged in front of her, Sara decided to end matters once and for all. One minute it was fantasy, and the next it was for real. She stabbed him repeatedly, and also forced Veronica to join in.

Afterwards, the girls removed the traces, washed the walls and disposed of and replaced one bloodstained dust sheet after they had got Rod's body into his car. Finally they plastered the knife into the bare wall, knowing that the room would be redecorated the following day.

Another cover-up was the telephone conversation which Kevin was supposed to have had with Sara. In fact, he did not speak with her at all, but to his mother. They both lied about it in order to protect Sara.

Sara's confession is actually rendered in a kind of *reverie* or flashback on Wexford's part which allows Rendell to present this confession in direct speech, as Sara had delivered it at the police station, rather than having it retold to Burden and Dr. Crocker by Wexford.

The girls intentionally placed Rod in a shallow grave as they wanted the body to be found soon. There was a good reason for this seemingly paradoxical intention. Sara wanted to be a medical student, had in fact been provisionally accepted by a teaching hospital. Rod already paid the university fees for Kevin, and in order to get a grant for his daughter, he would have had to reveal his considerable income to the authorities. The higher the income, the lower the grant – Sara knew why her father was denying her the opportunity to go to college. She might at first have considered using her knowledge of his bigamy (and the incest which had not really happened but of which she had convinced her mother and Veronica, and probably herself as well) to blackmail him. In the end it had seemed simpler to kill him. However, with her father simply gone missing, she could not inherit, so his body had to be found.

The same reasoning is true for the overnight bag. After first hiding it in the

forest, she dumped it into the pond as soon as she heard that it was going to be dragged. The knife which Mr. Milvey found in another pond on a separate occasion was merely a distraction.

After they had buried Rod, Sara drove the car to Arnold Road where, soon after, Eve Freeborn backed her own car into it and could thus confirm that the car had been parked there at ten o'clock at night on April 15. After a couple of weeks and some vandalism, it attracted the attention of one of the residents who reported it to the police.

The chapter ends with another bombshell, which is Wexford's announcement that in his opinion, Rod never assaulted anyone sexually and never committed incest with Sara.

In the final chapter, Rendell has Dr. Crocker explain Sigmund Freud's "seduction theory" of 1896. In it, Freud postulated (based on the testimonies of 13 women patients) that little girls were prone to fantasize that their fathers have made love to them (from which developed his stress on childhood fantasy and ultimately his postulation of the Oedipus complex).

Wexford insisted that it could not have happened to Sara because she was not the kind of person to whom this sort of thing happened. She had none of the character traits of the classic seduction or rape victim. She would have fought back, if not physically then with the weapons of blackmail or extortion. (Her mother Joy, however, fitted beautifully into the classic pattern, blaming her daughter and expressing worry about the family's reputation and her husband's going to jail.) To confirm his point, Wexford pointed out that Sara had read Freud and that there were books on incest in her bedroom. He also mentioned that it was Sara who had stabbed Colin Budd in a similar situation, thus proving that she was perfectly able to defend herself.

Wexford slipped into a second brief *reverie* when he got to Veronica's confession. She had always done what Sara had wanted her to do, and had even

grown her hair longer to look more like her. But what ultimately prompted her to confess was her fear that her mother might be arrested. Hearing this was a triumph for Wendy which compensated her for years of unwavering devotion to her daughter.

Wexford called the murder of Rod Williams a ritualistic killing (according to the ARRIA manifesto, and given the participation of Veronica), a revenge killing (for the imagined incest as well as for not being allowed to go to university), and an experimental killing (just to see if it could be done, out of disgust, out of disillusionment, and possibly again in fulfillment of the feminist manifesto). But above all it was murder for gain, to satisfy her ambition of becoming a medical doctor. She did not want an inheritance as such, but the financial means for her medical training. Dr. Crocker thought that this murder was “both coolly premeditated and carried out on an impulse.”

Here Rendell’s use of Shelley’s play *The Cenci* reveals another dimension. The play deals with rape, incest and patricide, and the reader is willing to accept the parallel for the story as well, although rape and incest do not actually occur. Rendell found a subtle and elegant way of leading her readership in the wrong direction.

Nearly as an afterthought – and as a vindication for Rodney Williams – Wexford mentioned that Rod did indeed have a young girlfriend beside his two wives. It was Jane Gardner, the daughter of Rodney’s former boss at Sevensmith Harding and the only person who had ever said anything nice about Rod. Her fingerprints had also been on Rod’s Ford Granada. They had had an assignation that evening at a hotel in Myringham. That was why he only had one change of clothing in his overnight bag. After Sara had drugged him, he had barely made it to his own house where Sara was waiting for him. If he needed to have a girlfriend beside his young wife Wendy and his even younger daughters, it would seem unlikely that he was out to commit incest with them.

With all the loose ends tied up, facts separated from fiction and all incongruous events explained, Wexford left Burden's house.

It is a satisfying conclusion. After finishing the book, the reader may feel tempted to go back into the text to check out some of the clues that he overlooked.

However, it should be noted that, although the crime was solved, the social problems that caused it were not. Rendell believes that we live in a basically amoral world. Women will continue to face discrimination and neither parents nor their children will ever be perfect.

Through her careful depictions of the different social ills which often cause crimes to be committed in the first place, Rendell has become a valuable critic of society and her novels have been described as 'social comedies'. They explore the hidden ties that link social realities which seem to have little or nothing in common.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Cf. my previous article "A Masterful Plot – An analysis of Barbara Vine's novel "The Brimstone Wedding", 2010.
- 2 Ian Rankin, 2010.
- 3 Luca Prono, 2009.
- 4 Rendell in an interview with Jodi Picoult on *The Monster in the Box*, 2009.
- 5 quoted in Libby Brooks, 2002.
- 6 Imogen Russell Williams, 2009.
- 7 Nicholas Blincoe, 1998.
- 8 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792–1822, an English romantic poet, wrote the play *The Cenci* in 1819.
- 9 Dictionary of Collective Nouns and Group Terms, 2008.
- 10 Luca Prono, 2009.

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