

Murder at a Remove

WHY GO THROUGH all the fuss and bother of committing murder when you can stalk your victims on the Internet and bully them into doing the deed themselves? Carol Jordan, the self-destructive but intensely interesting protagonist of **SPLINTER THE SILENCE** (*Atlantic Monthly*, \$26) and other mysteries by Val McDermid, doesn't buy that explanation for the death of Jasmine Burton, a forceful advocate for women and children exploited by traffickers in the sex trade. The "suicides" of other outspoken feminists may reveal a pattern, but that still doesn't answer an important question: How could a pack of cyber-trolls persuade a strong, self-assured woman to take her own life?

Carol used to be one of those women, a detective chief inspector and boss of an elite murder squad until she lost herself in the bottle, quit the police force, cut ties with her best friend and sloped off to bury herself in the Yorkshire countryside. But "in spite of everything, Carol Jordan's still standing," and she's got her faithful friend, the psychologist Tony Hill, to thank for that. When she hits rock bottom and is arrested on a D.U.I., he stages an intervention, moving into the barn she's restoring and seeing her through the worst of the drying out. But what really gets Carol on her feet and back on the force is the chance to assemble a crack team of investigators to hunt down the cyberbully — or is it the murderer? — punishing upstart women who "deny their proper role in family structures."

The villain — a garden-variety psycho with mommy issues — isn't all that interesting. But McDermid introduces thoughtful theories about the whole phenomenon of cyberbullying. Although some would like to believe a more civilized society has banished the worst kind of sexual depravity, "all the time, it was burrowing underground, hibernating and growing stronger."

Strange to say, it's one of the killer's designated victims who takes the most sympathetic view. "I think it's got a lot to do with the fact that the kind of work men do

has changed dramatically," says Ursula Foreman, a columnist for an online news site. Having been robbed of labor that tested their mettle, they quietly rage at their loss of pride and identity, of validation for their lives. And who do they blame? Don't ask.

JAMES LEE BURKE'S cowboy heroes are prone to drink, haunted by their ancestors, in thrall to their women, estranged from their sons and deeply in love with their homeland. The Holland men, a



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clan of quarrelsome Texans who have already figured in several of Burke's novels, honor their unruly heritage in a prequel, **HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN** (Simon & Schuster, \$27.99). The narrative opens in 1916 on the Mexican border and finds Hackberry Holland, a Texas Ranger like others of his kin, keeping up family traditions by slaughtering evildoers and innocents alike.

Hackberry has the devil in him, and his blood-and-booze-soaked adventures are really chapters in a punishing quest for deliverance. "I'm an authority on chaos and confusion and messing things up," he confesses. There are plenty of eye-catching diversions on his road to redemption: a train ride across the Great American Desert, a confrontation at a fancy-dress party at the Driskill Hotel in Austin and an evening in one particularly rowdy saloon in a Mexican village, a place where "gandy dancers, drovers, saddle tramps, gunmen for hire, prospectors, wranglers,

drummers from the East walked through the doors of their own volition and allowed themselves to be fleeced."

"GLASGOW WAS STRONG cheese: not to everyone's taste." That fair warning comes from Denise Mina, whose crime novels don't resemble anyone else's. Her plots are always functional, like the one in **BLOOD, SALT, WATER** (Little, Brown, \$26) about Roxanna Fuentecilla, a Spanish woman from a once wealthy family, mother of two children, who goes missing after getting involved in an elaborate fraud. But who cares about Roxanna when someone like Iain Fraser is around? Granted, the man is a murderer, but he's had a miserable life, and his wrenching guilt and remorse should earn him a free pass to heaven. Alex Morrow, the cop in this series (who has anger issues herself), feels "a pang of tenderness" for Fraser and his brethren because "most of them were victims too." Typical of Mina's unconventional novels, this one ends with "the sound of old women crying."

ANYONE WHO'S READ "The Dead Women of Juárez" knows that Sam Hawken writes with feeling about victimized women. In **THE NIGHT CHARTER** (Mulholland, \$26), he writes with less sentiment but more enthusiasm about an action figure who resembles a woman. After 12 years as an Army medic and a murderous history she'd rather not go into, Camaro Espinoza has decamped to Miami, where she runs a charter fishing business and doesn't do much socializing. "I like to keep it simple," she explains. "Boat. Water. Fish." Despite her savvy and style (she drives a pickup, rides a Harley and makes the first move on a man), Camaro falls for the hard-luck tale of a sweet sap named Parker Story and sails to the coast of Cuba to pick up a man of mystery. The rest isn't pretty, or even believable, but it gives Camaro a chance to use all the weapons she has stashed away, including her brains. □

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