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Book Report
about
Ian Rankin's Crime Novel
Knots & Crosses

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Passage One:

“John Rebus was moving through the jungle of the city, that jungle the tourists never saw, being too busy snapping away at the ancient golden temples, temples long since gone but still evident as shadows. This jungle closed in on the tourists relentlessly but unseen, a natural force, the force of dissipation and destruction.

Edinburgh’s an easy beat, his colleagues from the west coast would say. Try Partick for a night and tell me that it’s not. But Rebus knew different. He knew that Edinburgh was all appearances, which made the crime less easy to spot, but no less evident. Edinburgh was a schizophrenic city, the place of Jekyll & Hyde sure enough, the city of Deacon Brodie, of fur Coats and no knickers (as they said in the west). But it was a small city, too, and that would be to Rebus’s advantage. He hunted in the hard-man’s drinking dens, in the housing estates where heroin and unemployment were the totem kings, for he knew that somewhere in this anonymity a hard man could hide and could plan and could survive”.¹

Passage Two:

“Another unworthy thought, forgive me.

Which brought him to think of church-going. It was another Sunday, after all, and for weeks he had been promising himself that he would try again, would find another church in the city and would try all over again.

He hated congregational religion. He hated the smiles and the manners of the Sunday-dressed Scottish Protestant, the emphasis on a communion not with God but with your neighbours. He had tried seven churches of varying denominations in Edinburgh, and had found none to be his liking.

He had tried sitting for two hours at home of a Sunday, reading the Bible and saying a prayer, but somehow that did not work either. He was caught; a believer outwith his belief. Was a personal faith good enough for God? Perhaps, but not *his* personal faith, which seemed to depend upon guilt and his feelings of hypocrisy whenever he sinned, a guilt assuaged only by public show.

‘Is my bath ready, John?’

She re-tousled her hair, naked and confident, her glasses left behind in the bedroom. John Rebus felt his soul to be imperilled. Sod it, he thought, catching her around her hips. Guilt could wait. Guilt could always wait”.²

¹ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 193.

² Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 71.

Passage Three:

“The tourist side of the capital city. They were never interested in the housing-estates around this central husk. They never ventured into Pilton or Niddrie or Oxfords to make an arrest in a piss-drenched tenement; they were not moved by Leith’s pushers and junkies, the deft-handed corruption of the city’s gents, the pretty thefts of a society pushed so far into materialism that stealing was the only answer to what they thought of as their needs. And they were almost certainly unaware (they were not, after all, here to read local newspapers and watch local TV) of Edinburgh’s newest media star, the child murderer the police could not catch, the murderer who was leading the forces of law and order a merry dance without a clue or a lead or a cat in hell’s chance of finding him until he slipped up. He pitied Gill her job. He pitied himself. He pitied the city, right down to its crooks and bandits; its whores and gamblers, its perpetual losers and winners”.³

Conclusion: Ian Rankin’s View at Scottish Culture

“The real mystery in these books isn’t the crime. OK, it’s a crime novel, with a crime, an investigation and a resolution, so it’s got the structure of the crime novel. But underneath, the real mystery is Rebus coming to terms with Edinburgh”.⁴

What makes Ian Rankin’s crime novel *Knots & Crosses* so distinguishable Scottish is the local colour of the setting, namely Edinburgh. Rankin succeeds in drawing a detailed picture of Scotland’s capital that goes far behind the glorious façade of the commonly known city attractions. Detective Rebus, the main protagonist, provided with a seemingly realistic character with far more than one human failure, has to deal with the shortcomings of the modern Scottish society and, apart from the public, his profession forces him to have a close look at all the losers within the society as there are mentioned junkies, tramps, thieves and others. His emotionless realistic description of Edinburgh’s backside confronts the reader with unpopular truth which one, in difference to the public behaviour of better ignoring these kinds of failures, can not escape.

Furthermore, Rankin tries to consider in his first novel what concept Scottish culture distinguishes from others. Thereby, he always uses his best-known hometown Edinburgh as a sample to fill in the abstract term of Scottish culture. He tries to explain the contemporary state of Scottish society as a result of historical events and developments. For this reason, he recalls throughout the whole novel famous events of Edinburgh’s past. Due to this, Rankin permanently hints to Edinburgh barbarian history connected with negative experiences of body snatching, public execution, and misuse of religion amongst other uncountable dreadful events. It is the hidden dark side which Rankin steadily refers to and his famous detective John Rebus is the tool that helps this side onto the light.

Through this method, Rankin reviews Scottish society from an alternative perspective that withdraws the dominant glorious façade of Edinburgh as well as the notion of its commonly presented modern and open-minded society.

³ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 80-81.

⁴ Ian Rankin in “The Guardian” (published March 18, 2001).

Plot Summary: Remember the Past

“I think it’s astonishing that so many people would want to read about a dour Presbyterian Edinburgh cop”.⁵

Knots & Crosses, which was published 1987, is the first of Ian Rankin’s famous crime novels introducing the meanwhile well-known protagonist Detective Sergeant John Rebus as a central character. Rebus lives and works in the contemporary Edinburgh which he explores from a doom and gloomy side outside the elegant and well-known areas that tourists usually experience. Actually his private life remains a disaster. He lives separated from his wife, loses more and more the contact to his twelve-year old daughter Samantha, and feels permanently traced by diffuse feelings of guilt. Being used to repress his problems by drinking and smoking far too much, he constantly stands at the edge of a nervous breakdown, especially, if he is confronted with dreadful memories of his time by the SAS (Special Air Service). In this situation he has to cope with anonymous letters containing strange ropes with knots or matches tied to crosses. In this situation, he is called to hunt a killer who already abducted and killed two young girls in Edinburgh. And moreover, his new captain Anderson is the father of his wife’s new lover. After a third and a fourth girl is murdered by the same method the case arouses more and more attention and becomes at last a national matter. The media stylize the murderer to the new monster of Edinburgh and thereby hint to the dark and bloody history of Edinburgh. But, “the worst is not, so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’”.⁶ These words quoted by Rebus become horrible truth when the murderer starts to lead the search by his own rules, mugging Rebus’s wife and abducting his daughter. Rebus knows that he has very little time to catch his personal foe if he wants to save the life of his daughter; but he is still unable to recall his repressed memories until it is almost too late.

Local Aspects: The Edinburgh Factor

“But in Edinburgh the typical crime is grave robbing. Things happen under cloak of darkness”.⁷

The setting of *Knots & Crosses* is distinctively the contemporary Edinburgh. It is this town which gives Ian Rankin’s crime novel this intensive local Scottish colour. Counting all the referred streets, bars, places and districts like Haymarket, Oxcgangs, and Colinton district, Calton Hill, The Sutherland Bar, The Meadows, and The Grassmarket, for example, and comparing them with an actual map of Edinburgh,⁸ it becomes clear that Rebus’s Edinburgh is chosen from reality. Not only the names of the different streets like Great London Road, Waverly Road, Lothian Road, Fleet Street etc. are realistic ones, but also their location corresponds to reality. Moreover, Rankin tries to uncover their typical character and function within Edinburgh’s society by mentioning that Lotion Road, for example, turns into Edinburgh’s dustbin at night because it is filled with people looking for alcohol, women and amusement. At the same time, the author stresses the ambiguous character of this street when he mentions that the comfortable Sheraton Hotel and the even more famous Usher Hall can also be found there.⁹ Thereby, Rankin hints the reader to the complexity of Edinburgh’s society and focuses on the non-representative side of the town that people often tend to

⁵ Ian Rankin in “The Guardian” (published March 18, 2001).

⁶ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 162.

⁷ Ian Rankin in “January Magazine” (published January 2000).

⁸ Rob Humphreys and Donald Reid, *Scotland* (New York: Rough Guides, 2004) 118-119.

⁹ See Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 65-66.

In the following, Rankin makes use of the same method to characterize the different districts of Edinburgh. The social standing of the districts' typical inhabitants is thereby indicated by phrases like "the New Town's Mercedes owners"¹⁰ or by describing Leith as an old port that will never lose its subtle "port's mentality".¹¹ Rankin's precise town characterisation seems to provide the reader with insider knowledge equal to an Edinburgh inhabitant. From there, it is not astonishing that nowadays there is a growing demand for *www.rebustours.com*.¹² A firm that provides city tours through Edinburgh where all interested Rebus fans can rediscover the mentioned locations.

The Edinburgh scenes in *Knots & Crosses* are always easily imaginable and lead the reader away from the famous nicely arranged tourist destinations like the Edinburgh Castle, the Royal Infirmary, Greyfriars Kirkyard, or George IV Bridge, for example. Rebus's view at his home town is always a critical one that often concentrates on districts wherein the losers of modern society try to survive so that the reader is directly confronted with the shortcomings of modern Scottish society. Additionally, Rankin presents in his first crime novel his Edinburgh and its inhabitants as a grown society which is still influenced by its dark and bloody history. According to this, Edinburgh's contribution to the development of this story seems to be as important as its main protagonist John Rebus and for this reason can be valued as a central character.

Historical Aspects: The Dark Side of Edinburgh's History:

"But about Edinburgh: it's got a very dark history. It's a very repressed city, a very Calvinist, Presbyterian place".¹³

Ian Rankin hints to this history by often using intertextual connotations. While the police in Edinburgh are more than helpless catching the monster of Edinburgh, the press reminds the public of Deacon Brodie and Burke and Hare.¹⁴ The tale of Deacon Brodie (1741-1788) is still well-known in Edinburgh. He was an honourable respected member of the upper Edinburgh society, even a member of the town council, with an extravagant lifestyle which he secretly financed by burglary. In 1788 he was traced down and executed. It is said that Stevenson used Brodie's life story as inspiration to write his famous novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*.

Ian Rankin himself values the fascination of the dark side as a characteristic Scottish feature inherited from its bloody history, stating that "I'm still obsessed by the idea [...] of the Edinburgh character and the Scottish character being a Jekyll-and-Hyde thing".¹⁵

This hidden dark side Rankin also emphasizes when he mentions Burke and Hare in this novel; Edinburgh's most famous body snatchers who at first robbed graves and then developed their own method to strangulate people in order to sell them to Dr Robert Knox's school of anatomy.¹⁶

Another excursus to Edinburgh's famous history appears when Rebus, crossing the Old Town's tenements buildings, speaks of "Enlightenment ghosts" who are "articulate and

¹⁰ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 72.

¹¹ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 73.

¹² Ian Rankin recommends these tours at his homepage, stating that "Rebustours "discover the alternative side of modern Edinburgh". (<http://www.ianrankin.net/books.asp> (visited on August 15, 2005)).

¹³ Ian Rankin in "January Magazine" published January 2000.

¹⁴ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 102.

¹⁵ Ian Rankin in "Scottish Studies Review" (Volume 4, Nr.1, 2003) 126-137.

¹⁶ For a detailed look read *The Resurrectionists* at <http://www.scotshistoryonline.co.uk/burke.html> (visited August 15, 2005).

deferential”.¹⁷ The reference to the “Scottish Enlightenment”, a period in the later 1700s with many scientific, intellectual and aesthetic achievements is unambiguous.

Besides the many remarks of Edinburgh’s history concerning the development of the town during the centuries (hinting to characteristics of Medieval, Renaissance and Gregorian Edinburgh), it is noticeable that Ian Rankin also indirectly sticks to another cultural feature of Scotland: the Scots Gothic tradition. Describing especially Edinburgh and its inhabitants always from a dark and gloomy point of view he adopts this literal tradition to the genre of the modern crime novel.

Another important historical aspect, Rankin several times refers to, is embodied in John Rebus himself, namely in his strange Presbyterian belief. Rebus’s religious belief seems to be a direct result of the bloody religious wars with its uncountable massacres and executions of Edinburgh’s inhabitants who did not want to accept the British King as their head of church. Therefore, Rebus aversion against congregational religion¹⁸ could be seen as a product of the misuse of the weekly church-going by the medieval-church which used it as an instrument to control and spy out its members. For Rebus his religious belief is always bound to the question of guilt. He can only imagine a malevolent creator as he is described in the Old Testament and handed down through the centuries. He prays to God if he is despaired but does not really expect an answer and his belief does not pretend him from sinning again. But it is not only the protagonist who has to cope with the barbarity of former times. Rebus’s colleague Jack Morton also reflects the unbelievable dreadful ecclesial history when he thinks about the background of the Greyfriars Bobby’s statue across the Kirkyard, the Covenanters, and the public executions which took place on the High Street.¹⁹

Through all the above mentioned varying connotations of Edinburgh’s past that are embodied within the plot of *Knots & Crosses*, Rankin leads the reader to a higher understanding concerning his described contemporary Edinburgh with its typical cultural features.

Social Aspects: The Contemporary Scottish Society

“I’m writing commentaries on Scotland’s present, its foibles and psychoses, the flaws in its character. I’m dissecting a nation, [...]”.²⁰

In *Knots & Crosses* Ian Rankin concentrates on describing the shortcomings within the Scottish Society and uses the realistic setting of Edinburgh to present them. First of all, he mentions the losers of a society based on increasing competition, for example the small village Five which can not offer its inhabitants any future prospects and therefore has been left from everyone who had the opportunity to escape. Furthermore, he presents the Scottish capital from its backside with its less known districts like Pilton, Oxford, or Niddrie that are inhabited, due to high unemployment rates, by despaired people who take drugs and steal what they need.²¹ Additionally, Rankin also mentions people who are normally ignored by the society like tramps because they do not fit into the picture of a modern prosperous Edinburgh whose image has been polished up for the tourism industry.

¹⁷ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 37.

¹⁸ Read Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 71.

¹⁹ For further reading have a look at Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 71,123,127.

²⁰ Ian Rankin, *Exile on Princes Street: Inspector Rebus and I*, quoted in <http://www.twbooks.co.uk/authors/rebus.html> (Visited on August 15, 2005).

²¹ See Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 80.

Secondly, lower social classes are distinctively characterized by speech. Namely, the above mentioned losers use a special kind of social dialect which distinguishes them from all the other people. They speak a seemingly old fashioned Scottish dialect which implies that they never learned the modern standard language. In this context, the manner how Rankin describes Rebus's "personal witch"²² in connection with the detective's unusual kind treatment of her questions moreover modern society's treatment of its needy persons. Thirdly, *Knots & Crosses* contains a passage wherein the disadvantages of a bare capitalistic view, especially the loss of idealism, are discovered.²³ Ian Rankin thereby refers to an old problem the Scottish society still suffers from. Although Edinburgh is famous for its leading Universities, the well-educated professionals mostly decide to leave Scotland in order to accept better paid offers from England or even emigrate to other more prosperous countries.²⁴ Another interesting discourse which is indicated in *Knots & Crosses* is the far too simple mentality with which the public wants to answer the murderer's brutality. They suggest hanging as favourite punishment and even the Scottish Parliament picks up this emotional led debate and discusses the topic seriously.²⁵ The reader gets the impression that this reaction seems to be an unreasonable rediscovery of former well-known medieval punishments and contradicts the notion of a modern civilized society. Lastly, Ian Rankin deals critically with society's contemporary shortcomings by stating that the media stylize the murder cases to a national event. Thereby, they create their own best-selling versions of the truth which Scottish public willingly adopt. From this point of view Ian Rankin's crime novel ends irreconcilable because aesthetic and moral values still does not seem to count for these truth-makers on their search for ever new bestselling stories.

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²² Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 47, 198.

²³ Read Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 197.

²⁴ I refer to Frances Russell Hart who carries out that "the net loss by emigration from 1861 to 1951 was 1,585,000 people, forty-three percent of the national increase. Emigration during the 1960s averaged 35,300 annually, [...]".

Frances Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London: John Murray, 1978) 204.

²⁵ Ian Rankin, *Knots & Crosses* (London: Orion Books, 2004) 226.

²⁶ Ian Rankin in "The Guardian" (published March 18, 2001).

recalls throughout the whole novel famous events of Edinburgh's past. Due to this, Rankin permanently hints to Edinburgh barbarian history connected with negative experiences of body snatching, public execution, and misuse of religion amongst other uncountable dreadful events. It is the hidden dark side which Rankin steadily refers to and his famous detective John Rebus is the tool that helps this side onto the light.

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<http://www.rebustours.com>. (Visited on August 15, 2005).

All Ian Rankin's titles are available on audio. Also available: Jackie Leven Said by Ian Rankin and Jackie Leven. Born in the Kingdom of Fife in 1960, Ian Rankin graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1982, and then spent three years writing novels when he was supposed to be working towards a PhD in Scottish Literature. Ian Rankin has been elected a Hawthornden Fellow, and is also a past winner of the Chandler-Fulbright Award. He is the recipient of four Crime Writers' Association Dagger Awards including the prestigious Diamond Dagger in 2005. An idea for a novel (crime thriller) which started as one situation and has blossomed into a whole plot. I've not written any of it yet, but it's all there in my head, from page one to circa page 250. Book Report about Ian Rankin's Crime Novel Knots & Crosses. Andrea Schöningh Marienstraße 9. 32791 Lage/Lippe Phone: (05232) 63820 E-mail: andreaschoening@web.de Matrikel Nr. 2 Ian Rankin, Knots & Crosses (London: Orion Books, 2004) 71. Passage Three: "The tourist side of the capital city."