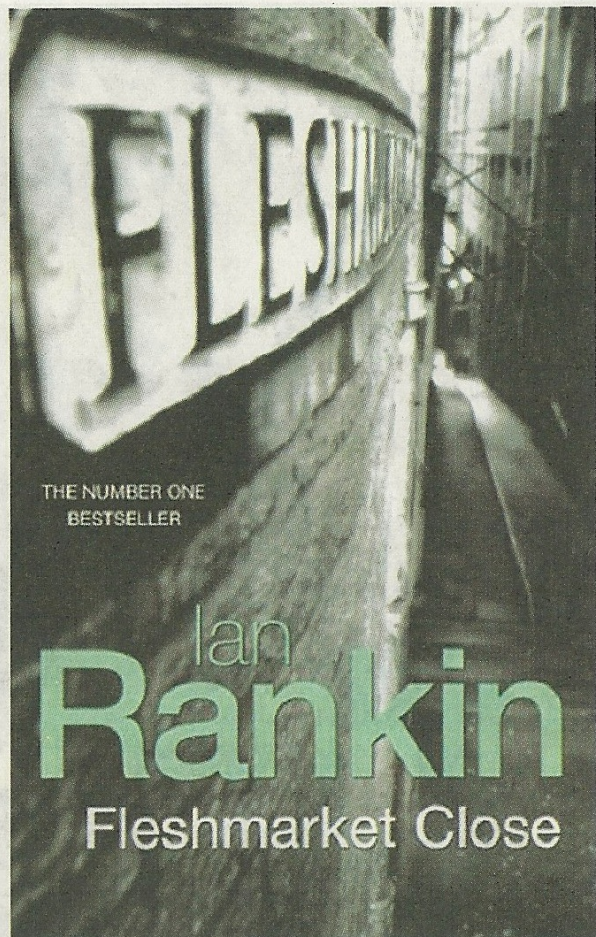


book on the beach

■ Matthew Hunt



Fleshmarket Close

by Ian Rankin

Anyone who visits Edinburgh (Scotland's capital city, and the setting for the novel *Fleshmarket Close*) will find a lively place with wide shopping streets, a grand castle, and a huge annual arts festival. Ian Rankin's novel is as far removed from this atmosphere as it's possible to be, concentrating on a small cobbled back-alley (the *Fleshmarket Close* of the title). In fact, Rankin deliberately highlights the differences between the grimy back-streets of his novel and the picture-postcard scenery that most of us are familiar with.

Walking from Edinburgh Castle, down the Royal Mile to Holyrood Palace, as every tourist to the city has done (myself included), you will feel a million miles away from Rankin's seedy locales. In fact, they could be right around the corner without us knowing it.

he writes about are all based on fact. In the UK, immigration is currently a 'hot potato' – a controversial political topic. It looks set to be the central issue dividing the main political parties before the election in the Spring. Sadly, public opinion (backed by most of the popular newspapers) regards immigrants with distrust and disdain.

Rankin's novel is important because it challenges this prejudiced viewpoint, consciously drawing our attentions to the dispossessed people we would otherwise ignore. *Fleshmarket Close* may be a detective story, though it is also a work of social realism. It is a sign of Rankin's skill as a writer that his attention to realistic detail enhances rather than detracts from the detective story.

Fleshmarket Close, and the previous *Rebus* novels, have been best-sellers in Scotland,

"Rankin spends considerable time on his description of how illegal immigrants live in the city."

This is the latest in Rankin's Rebus series, his fifteenth novel featuring the Edinburgh detective John Rebus. The character was introduced in 1987, in a novel called *Knots & Crosses*. Rebus, like all modern fictional detectives, is a man with many personal problems. He drinks and smokes too much, and his relationships are invariably disastrous. Like Inspector Morse, Rebus is a character with recognisably human weaknesses and demons. The improbably flawless detectives of the past (Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Poirot) are no more. At home amongst the 'mean streets' of the city, Rebus is a natural successor to 'noir' detectives such as Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade. In fact, Rankin's novels have been famously described as 'tartan noir'.

Fleshmarket Close (the street) has had a miserable past, to say the least. A corpse is discovered there— an unidentified illegal immigrant is found murdered. Then the bodies of a woman and a baby are discovered under a concrete floor. Amongst the living characters are prostitutes and rapists. This scenario of dead babies and dingy streets is as depressing as it sounds, and readers should expect to be chilled by the novel rather than amused.

Rankin spends considerable time on his description of how illegal immigrants live in the city. He researched these details carefully, and the squalid living conditions

of course, though they have also sold very well worldwide. They certainly deserve to, as they are extremely well written, though their international success is still surprising given the amount of Scottish slang Rankin uses throughout them. British readers may know what a "wee toe-rag" is, for example, though most Americans surely wouldn't. (The novel was actually renamed *Fleshmarket Alley* in America, because American streets are called alleys rather than closes.)

Anyone who has read Rankin's previous Rebus stories will surely need no further encourage

ment to pick up *Fleshmarket Close*. This is guaranteed to be popular, based simply on the success of its many equally accomplished predecessors. However, the novel is also sufficiently self-contained that anyone with no previous experience of Rankin or Rebus will find it equally gripping.

The novel is political though never polemical. It is honest in its depictions of life's murkier side yet is never exploitative. It ranks among the best of Rankin's long-running explorations of his complex character, John Rebus. It is a sophisticated detective story, and an evocative account of Edinburgh from an author who has lived in the city throughout his adult life. ■

***Fleshmarket Close* by Ian Rankin** is available at Asia Books.

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