AN INTRODUCTION TO DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JOHN REBUS

The first novels to feature John Rebus, a flawed but resolutely humane detective, were not an overnight sensation, and success took time to arrive. But the wait became a period that allowed Ian Rankin to come of age as a crime writer, and to develop Rebus into a thoroughly believable, flesh-and-blood character straddling industrial and postindustrial Scotland — a gritty yet perceptive man coping with his own demons. As Rebus struggled to keep his relationship with his daughter, Sammy, alive following his divorce, and to cope with the imprisonment of his brother Michael, while all the time trying to strike a blow for morality against a fearsome array of sinners (some justified and some not), readers began to respond enthusiastically. Fans admired Rankin’s re-creation of a picture-postcard Edinburgh with a vicious tooth-and-claw underbelly just a heartbeat away, his believable but at the same time complex plots, and, best of all, his portrayal of Rebus as a conflicted man trying always to solve the unsolvable, and to do the right thing.

As the series progressed, Rankin refused to shy away from contentious issues such as corruption in high places, pedophilia, and illegal immigration, combining his unique seal of tight plotting with a bleak realism leavened by brooding humor.

In Rebus the reader is presented with a rich and constantly evolving portrait of a complex and troubled man, irrevocably tinged with the sense of being an outsider and, potentially, unable to escape being a “justified sinner” himself. Rebus’s life is intricately related to his Scottish environs, too, enriched by Rankin’s attentive depiction of locations and careful regard to Rebus’s favorite music, watering holes, and books, as well as his often fraught relationships with colleagues and family. And so, alongside Rebus, the reader is taken on a sometimes painful, occasionally hellish
journey to the depths of human nature, always rooted in the minutiae of a very recognizable Scottish life.

For General Discussion Regarding the Rebus Series

1. How does Ian Rankin reveal himself as a writer interested in using fiction to “tell the truths the real world can’t”?

2. There are similarities between the lives of the author and his protagonist — for instance, both Rankin and John Rebus were born in Fife, lost their mother at an early age, enjoy a drink, and have children with physical problems. Is it in any way useful to think of John Rebus as Ian Rankin’s alter ego?

3. Could it be said that Rebus is trying to make sense in a general way of the world around him, or is he seeking answers to the “big questions”? Is it relevant that he is a believer in God and comes from a Scottish Presbyterian background? Would Rebus see confession in the religious and the criminal senses as similar?

4. How does Rankin explore notions of Edinburgh as a character in its own right? In what way does he contrast the glossily public and seedily private faces of the city with the public and private faces of those Rebus meets?

5. How does Rankin use musical sources — the Elvis references in The Black Book, for instance, or the Rolling Stones allusions in Let It Bleed — as a means of character development through the series? What does Rebus’s own taste in music and books say about him as a person?

6. What is your impression of Rebus? If you have read more than one of the Rebus novels, discuss how his character has developed.
7. If Rebus has a problem with notions of “pecking order” and the idea of authority generally, what does it say about him that he chose careers in hierarchical institutions such as the army and then the police?

8. How does Rebus relate to women — as lovers, objects of flirtation, family members, and colleagues?

9. Do the flashes of gallows humor shown by the pathologists but sometimes also in Rebus’s own comments increase or dissipate narrative tension? Does Rebus use black comedy for the same reasons the pathologists do?

10. Do Rebus’s personal vulnerabilities make him sympathetic to the frailties of others?

11. How does Rebus compare to other long-standing popular detectives created by British writers, such as Holmes, Poirot, Morse, or Dalgliesh? Are there more similarities or differences among them?
At the grim Knoxland housing complex, the brutally stabbed body of an illegal immigrant and the frantic voice of a foreign woman calling the emergency services to report the incident prove to be the gateway into yet another new world for Rebus: that of a dumping ground for unhappy immigrants, dispossessed asylum seekers, and economic migrants. And it’s a brave new world at work for Rebus too, as he and DS Siobhan Clarke are now based at Gayfield Square police station.

Siobhan, however, is plunged back into an old, murky world when Mr. and Mrs. Jardine, the parents of a rape and suicide victim from three years earlier, seek her out to help find their beloved other daughter, Ishbel, who has now vanished. Ominously, sister Tracy’s attacker, Donny Cruikshank, has recently been released from prison.

Could these seemingly unrelated events be linked to the discovery of the fake skeletons of a mother and child in a pub cellar in Fleshmarket Close, and, in any case, what sort of prank is this exactly? And does the Nook lap-dancing club show that there’s more than one sort of flesh market? Sadly, as grim as Knoxland is, perhaps Whitemire Immigration Removal Centre is even more so. After all, “illegals” are now big business, a business that gangs from elsewhere are keen to muscle in on.

The complicated issues behind both Rebus’s and Siobhan’s investigations (and Rebus’s thoughts on his own migrant background, only a couple of generations ago) mean they can avoid talking to each other about what now overshadows their private moments together — the fleeting kiss at the end of their previous adventure.

_Fleshmarket Alley_ was selected as the Crime Thriller of the Year at the 2005 British Book Awards, and in the same year, Ian Rankin was awarded the Crime Writers’ Association’s Diamond Dagger.
QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. From Rebus’s perspective, what is the most obvious sign at Gayfield Square that those on high think it’s time he retired?

2. How is the element of sexual tension between Rebus and Siobhan dealt with, both by the detectives themselves and by the author?

3. What are Siobhan’s first thoughts when Mr. and Mrs. Jardine come to her for help? Why?

4. “It was in the nature of the job that you became involved in people’s lives intimately — more intimately than many of them would like — but for a brief time only.” How does this aspect of police work affect Rebus and Siobhan?

5. “Sitting at the table, she was aware that the few pounds she had gained recently were telling her to loosen her trousers. Her blouse, too, was tight under the arms.” Is Siobhan starting to let herself go in a slightly Rebus-like manner? What is her response to this possible state of affairs?

6. What is Rebus’s response in Fleshmarket Alley to the manner in which many journalists set about doing their work? If you’ve read other Inspector Rebus novels, does Rebus appear more critical of journalists here than in other books?

7. Is Rebus in any sense a racist? Is there an element of guilt in his gift of toys to the Yurgii children?
8. Rebus says that the police spend most of their time chasing the underworld but that really it’s the “overworld” that an eye should be kept on. What might he mean?

9. There are several allusions to different sorts of flesh in this novel. Discuss the different interpretations of the word.

10. Is it important that Felix Storey is black? Why?

11. Discuss Ishbel Jardine’s motives for writing to Donny Cruikshank during his prison sentence.

12. Does the torch incident backfire on Rebus? Can he see the funny side?

13. Discuss the difference between “mates” and “pals.”

14. Is Siobhan fooling herself when she tries to brush off her argument with Caro Quinn as mere “barroom politics”?

15. “Since his last stretch of jail time, however, he’d kept his head down. Not that Rebus believed the crap about retirement: people like Cafferty didn’t ever jack it in. To Rebus’s mind, Cafferty had just grown wiliest with age — and wiser to the ways police might go about investigating him.” Could much of this statement be leveled at Rebus, too?