

THE LONG CLOSE CALL

Reviews

The Long Close Call is J. Wallis Martin's third novel, and it places her firmly in the first division of the newer crime-writing generation. Her portrayal of the curiously deep bond – even similarities of moral perceptions – between villains and coppers is conveyed with subtlety but shocking certainty. It emerges not just in the tormented relationship between the McLaughlans, but also in the tender, ultimately destructive love of Jarvis, the Glasgow investigator of 1968, for his prey's wife. At times the book reminded me – and this is meant as a strong compliment – of the much underrated Bill James, master of the bleak principle that criminals and the police are ultimately on the same side of the coin, with the rest of the world on the obverse. **Marcel Berlins, *The Times*, 18/03/2000**

'For my money, J. Wallis Martin is writing the best English suspense novels out there' – **Elizabeth George**

'J. Wallis Martin gets better with each book'. **Susan Jaegar, *Sunday Telegraph***

'Like Reginald Hill, she brings compassion and tension to a thriller that grips from the first page.' **Jan Lee, *Oxford Times*.**

***The Long Close Call* was published in hardback by Hodder & Stoughton in March 2000. However, in 2001, Scorpion Press published a leather-bound, limited edition which carries the following foreword by the best-selling author, Val McDermid.**

It's very unusual for a first novel to make it on to a shortlist for best crime novel of the year; all the more exceptional when it's a British novel and the award in question is American. But that's what happened to Julia Wallis Martin's psychological thriller, *A Likeness in Stone*, which scored that distinction when it was nominated for the Edgar, given by the Mystery Writers of America.

It's an honour that the book richly deserved, for it is a remarkably assured and complex debut. Perhaps more than anything, it demonstrates how far British crime fiction has come from the detective novel of the Golden Age of Christie, Allingham and Sayers. Gone are the cardboard characters, the stereotypes and ciphers, to be replaced by a cast of players whose flaws, fears and fatal attractions resonate with realism.

Gone too is the neat denouement, where the villain is unmasked and handed over to Inspector Plod by the marvellous detective whose extraordinary intelligence is no match for the criminal, however ingenious. Instead, we readers are presented with endings where, although certain key elements are resolved, there are no easy answers and characters are left to find their own way forward in a world where there is no such thing as finished business.

The psychological thriller has opened up the doors of the human condition in a way that few forms of fiction have achieved, and Julia Wallis Martin is one of a handful of writers

who hold up a mirror to our untidy lives and show us some of the fractured truths hidden in the shadows over our shoulders.

Wallis Martin has also turned her back on the traditional series novel, preferring to address a fresh group of characters and new terrain with each of her books. But one theme that runs through *A Likeness in Stone*, *The Bird Yard*, and now *The Long Close Call* is that of characters who have been emotionally abandoned by those who had a duty of care. It's a rich and challenging seam for a writer to explore, because these characters have unpredictable responses to situations. For the writer, the task is to wrong-foot the reader's expectations, but to do it in a way that seems entirely credible when we look back at the information we have in our possession.

Over the course of only three novels, Wallis Martin has become an expert in delineating the lives of these damaged souls, bringing them to life with an insight and compassion that fixes them in the hearts of readers long after the book has been closed. She does this in a clear and limpid prose that is always understated, never overwritten. Like all of the best writers, she leaves a space between the lines for our own imagination to do its work.

Now Crime fiction enters its third century, it has found a new maturity and an ability constantly to reinvent itself. As long as writers of the calibre of Julia Wallis Martin choose to enter the field, it is clear that we readers are in no danger of the well running dry.

Val McDermid