



The Vault: An Inspector Wexford Novel

By Ruth Rendell

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INCLUDES AN EXCERPT OF RENDELL'S FINAL NOVEL, *DARK CORNERS*

In the stunning climax to Rendell's classic 1998 novel *A Sight for Sore Eyes*, three bodies—two dead, one living—are entombed in an underground chamber beneath a picturesque London house. Twelve years later, the house's new owner pulls back a manhole cover, and discovers the vault—and its grisly contents. Only now, the number of bodies is four. How did somebody else end up in the chamber? And who knew of its existence?

With their own detectives at an impasse, London police call on former Kingsmarkham Chief Inspector Wexford, now retired and living with his wife in London, to advise them. Wexford, missing the thrill of a good case, jumps at the chance to sleuth once again. His dogged detective skills and knack for figuring out the criminal mind take him to London neighborhoods, posh and poor, as he follows a complex trail leading back to the original murders a decade ago.

But just as the case gets hot, a devastating family tragedy pulls Wexford back to Kingsmarkham, and he finds himself transforming from investigator into victim. Ingeniously plotted, *The Vault* is a "masterful" (*The Seattle Times*) sequel to *A Sight for Sore Eyes* that will satisfy both longtime Wexford fans and new Rendell readers alike.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Ruth Rendell is bidding to join Defoe and Dickens in creating one of the great criminal cities of literature."-
-The Independent (UK)

"Ruth Rendell has written an astounding 59 novels. All are reason to rejoice, but this 60th, starring the beloved Reginald Wexford, is worth shouting about from the rooftops... [A] classic Rendell tale."— **Carol Memmott, USA Today**

"[A] fiendish plot... Wexford hasn't lost his touch."--**Marilyn Stasio, The New York Times Book Review**

"This is Ruth Rendell at her authoritative best."—**Muriel Dobbin, Washington Times**

About the Author

Ruth Rendell (1930–2015) won three Edgar Awards, the highest accolade from Mystery Writers of America, as well as four Gold Daggers and a Diamond Dagger for outstanding contribution to the genre from England's prestigious Crime Writers' Association. Her remarkable career spanned a half century, with more than sixty books published. A member of the House of Lords, she was one of the great literary figures of our time.

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1

"ACURIOUS WORLD WE live in," said Franklin Merton, "where one can afford a house but not a picture of a house. That must tell us some profound truth. But what? I wonder."

The picture he was talking about was Simon Alpheton's *Marc and Harriet in Orcadia Place*, later bought by Tate Britain—simply "the Tate" in those days—and the house the one in the picture, Orcadia Cottage. His remark about the curious world was addressed to the Harriet of the picture, for whom he had bought it and whom he intended to marry when his divorce came through. Later on, when passion had cooled and they were husband and wife, Franklin said, "I didn't want to get married. I married you because I'm a man of honour and you were my mistress. Some would say my views are out-of-date, but I dispute that. The apparent change is only superficial. I reasoned that no one would want my leavings, so for your sake, the decent thing was to make an honest woman of you."

His first wife was Anthea. When he deserted her, he was also obliged to desert their dog, O'Hara, and to him that was the most painful thing about it.

"You don't keep a bitch and bark yourself," he said to Harriet when she protested at having to do all the housework.

"Pity I'm not an Irish setter," she said, and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince.

They lived together for five years and were married for twenty-three, the whole time in that house, Orcadia Cottage or number 7a Orcadia Place, London NW8. Owing to Franklin's sharp tongue, verbal cruelty, and indifference, and to Harriet's propensity for sleeping with young tradesmen in the afternoons, it was not a

happy marriage. They took separate holidays, Franklin going away ostensibly on his own but in fact with his first wife, and he came back from the last one only to tell Harriet he was leaving. He returned to Anthea and her present Irish setter, De Valera, intending to divorce Harriet as soon as feasible. Anthea, a generous woman, urged him to do his best to search for her, for Harriet couldn't be found at Orcadia Cottage. The largest suitcase, most of her clothes, and the best of the jewellery he had bought her were missing, and Franklin's belief was that she had gone off with her latest young man.

"She'll be in touch as soon as she's in need," said Franklin to Anthea, "and that won't be long delayed."

But Harriet never got in touch. Franklin went back to Orcadia Cottage to look for some clue to where she might have gone but found only that the place was exceptionally neat, tidy, and clean.

"One odd thing," he said. "I lived there for all those years and never went into the cellar. There was no reason to do so. Just the same, I could have sworn there was a staircase going down to it with a door just by the kitchen door. But there isn't."

Anthea was a much cleverer woman than Harriet. "When you say you could have sworn, darling, do you mean you would go into court, face a jury, and say, 'I swear there was a staircase in that house going down to the cellar'?"

After thinking about it, Franklin said, "I don't think so. Well, no, I wouldn't."

He put the house on the market and bought one for Anthea and himself in South Kensington. In their advertisements the estate agents described Orcadia Cottage as "the Georgian home immortalized in the internationally acclaimed artwork of Simon Alpheton." The purchasers, an American insurance broker and his wife, wanted to move in quickly, and when Franklin offered them the report his own surveyors had made thirty years before, they were happy to do without a survey. After all, the house had been there for two hundred years and wasn't likely to fall down now.

CLAY AND DEVORA SILVERMAN bought the house from Franklin Merton in 1998 and lived there until 2002 before returning to the house they had rented out in Hartford, Connecticut. The first autumn they spent at Orcadia Cottage the leaves on the Virginia creeper which covered the entire front and much of the back of the house turned from green to copper and copper to red and then started to fall off. Clay Silverman watched them settle on the front garden and the paving stones in the back. He was appalled by the red, sticky, sodden mass of leaves on which he and Devora slipped and slid and Devora sprained her ankle. Knowing nothing about natural history and still less about gardening, he was well-informed about art and was familiar with the Alpheton painting. It was one of his reasons for buying Orcadia Cottage. But he had assumed that the green leaves covering the house that formed the background to the lovers' embrace remained green always and remained on the plant. After all of them had fallen, he had the creeper cut down.

Orcadia Cottage emerged as built of bricks in a pretty pale red colour. Clay had shutters put on the windows and the front door painted a pale greenish gray. In the paved yard at the back of the house was what he saw as an unsightly drain cover with a crumbling stone pot on top of it. He had a local nursery fill a tub with senecios, heathers, and cotoneaster to replace the pot. But four years later he and Devora moved out and returned home. Clay Silverman had given £800,000 for the house and sold it for £1.5 million to Martin and Anne Rokeby.

The Rokebys had a son and daughter; there were only two bedrooms in Orcadia Cottage, but one was large enough to be divided and this was done. For the first time in nearly half a century the house was home to

children. Again there was no survey on the house, for Martin and Anne paid cash and needed no mortgage. They moved into Orcadia Cottage in 2002 and had been living there for four years, their children teenagers by this time, when Martin raised the possibility with his wife of building underground. Excavations to construct an extra room or two—a wine cellar, say, or a “family room,” a study, or all of those things—were becoming fashionable. You couldn’t build on to your historic house or add an extra story, but the planning authority might let you build subterraneanly. A similar thing had been done in Hall Road, which was near Orcadia Place, and Martin had watched the project with interest.

A big room under Orcadia Cottage would be just the place for their children to have a large-screen television, their computers, their ever-more-sophisticated arrangements for making music, and maybe an exercise room too for Anne, who was something of a workout fanatic. In the late summer of 2006 Martin began by consulting the builders who had divided the large bedroom, but they had gone out of business. A company whose board outside the Hall Road house gave their name, phone number, and an e-mail address were next. But the men who came round to have a look said it wouldn’t be feasible. A different firm was recommended to him by a neighbour. One who came said he thought it could be done. Another said it was possible if Martin didn’t mind losing all the mature trees in the front garden.

Martin and Anne and the children all went to Australia for a month. The house was too old, prospective builders said; it would be unwise to disturb the foundations. Others said it could be done but at a cost twice that which Martin had estimated. They said all this on the phone without even looking at it. Nevertheless, he applied to the planning authority for permission to build underneath the house. The project was put an end to when planning permission was refused, having had a string of protests from all the Rokebys’ neighbours except the one who had recommended the builder.

All this took about a year. In the autumn of 2007 the Rokebys’ son, who had been the principal family member in favour of the underground room, went off to university. Time went on and the plan was all but forgotten. The house seemed bigger now their daughter was away at boarding school. In the early spring of 2009 Martin and Anne went on holiday to Florence. There, in a shop on the Arno, Anne fell in love with a large amphora displayed in its window. Apparently dredged up from the waters of the Mediterranean, it bore a frieze round its rim of nymphs and satyrs dancing and wreathing each other with flowers.

“I must have that,” said Anne. “Imagine that replacing that hideous old pot.”

“You have it,” Martin said. “Why not? So long as you don’t try getting it on the flight.”

The shop sent it, carefully packed in a huge crate, and it finally arrived in St. John’s Wood in May 2009 by some circuitous route not involving aircraft. A local nursery agreed to plant it with agapanthus and *Sedum spectabile*, but before this was done, Martin emptied the plants and soil out of the wooden tub, placed the remains of the tub into a black plastic bag, and put it out into the mews for the rubbish collection.

“I’ve often wondered what’s under that lid thing but never bothered to have a look.”

“Now’s your chance,” said Anne, uninterested.

“It’s probably too heavy to lift.”

But it wasn’t too heavy. Martin lifted the manhole cover to disclose a large, dark cavity. He could see nothing much beyond what appeared to be a plastic bag or sheet of plastic lying in the depths. Better get a torch, he thought, and he did, thus wrecking his life for a long time to come.

An exaggeration? Perhaps. But not much of one. By shining that torch down into the dark cavity, he gained a place for his wife and himself and his home on the front page of every daily newspaper, put an end to his and his family's peace for months, attracting mobs of sightseers to the street and the mews, reducing the selling price of his house by about a million pounds, and making Orcadia Place as notorious as Christie's home in Notting Hill and the Wests' in Gloucester.

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Users Review

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