

BYRON SHIRE ECHO BOOK REVIEW No 7

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Book Title: Spider Trap

Author: Barry Maitland

Reviewer: Marele Day

Freud's explanation for the enduring appeal of mysteries and crime fiction has to do, not surprisingly, with sex. He maintains that our interest in the genre is an adult manifestation of the Big Mystery we all faced as children – what went on behind our parents' closed bedroom door. The cries and whispers, sighs, creaking beds. These were the clues. But how to make sense of them? What was happening? Who was doing what and to whom?

What Freud omitted to mention was the appeal of a good story, and crime writer Barry Maitland is a master of the form. The UK-born author moved to Australia in 1984 to head the School of Architecture at Newcastle University, a position he vacated in 2000 to become a full-time writer. The influence of architecture and urban design can be seen in the elegant construction of Maitland's crime novels although Maitland himself takes it further back, to his great-grandparents who were weavers. 'I often feel that the process of writing must be similar to what they did – trying to create a rich, coherent and completely convincing pattern of words, ideas, characters and events.'

Rich, coherent and completely convincing story telling is exactly what he gives us in *Spider Trap*, the ninth in the series featuring Detective Chief Inspector David Brock and his colleague, Detective Sergeant Kathy Kolla, of Scotland Yard's prestigious Special Branch. This time they are investigating the murder of two young West Indian girls in Lambeth, south London. The crime has all the markings of an execution, the victims on their knees, tied up and shot through the head. A few pages later, human remains are found in the same area - amongst them a skull with a bullet hole in it dating back to the early 1980s, the time of the Brixton riots.

In the measured release of information and clues that follow, the crimes of the past cast a huge shadow over the present with an impact that is far-reaching. For Brock in particular the case is personal, taking him back to his early days in Lambeth where he was up against the powerful crime dynasty of Spider Roach and his sons. Although the Roach boys are now middle-aged 'respectable businessmen', Spider's web is pervasive and sticks to everything. Through the course of the novel the web begins to unravel and no amount of heavy-handed shoring up by the Roaches and their henchmen can stop the past from seeping to the surface.

The atmosphere and tone of *Spider Trap* are suitably bleak and depressing, opening with snow falling 'in mean little flakes at first, but then in plump silent gobbets'. We are given access to zones we may be reluctant to venture into

on our own but which nevertheless intrigue – ill-lit streets, the mysterious underworld, the dark places of the heart. Maitland's London vividly comes to life. More interesting still are the characters who inhabit it – misfit schoolboy Adam Nightingale who discovers the first of the human remains, big-shot bad boy Teddy Vexx, old Winnie Wellington who in the early days helped new arrivals, refugees from Jamaica's ganglands. Michael Grant, anti-drugs and corruption crusader, was one of those boys, and went even further, penetrating the upper echelons of society to become a Member of Parliament, symbolically immortal. 'Nobody dies in the Palace of Westminster,' he remarks. 'If one of us has a fatal heart attack or stroke, we remain, be we stiff as a board, technically alive until the ambulance crosses the river to St Thomas', where we are pronounced dead.' But as Michael discovers, Parliamentary privilege cannot provide him with immunity from his own past.

Crime fiction relies on Darwinian principles of survival – diversity in the species and the ability to adapt to the environment. In the hands of writers such as Barry Maitland the British mystery has become a lot grittier and more hard-boiled than the genteel conjectures of Miss Marple or Sherlock Holmes. With detectives Brock and Kolla as travel guides, *Spider Trap* takes you behind closed doors, giving you a view of London that you won't get on an eight-day package tour.