



The Brimstone Wedding

by Barbara Vine; Penguin Books, 1996; 312 pages; \$14.95 softcover

In Barbara Vine's novel we witness an unravelling of two separate stories, one set in the past and one in the present. Jenny is a nursing home carer in Britain. Her bond with an elderly patient, Stella, leads to the women sharing intimate details about their relationships. Stella is a wealthy, gracious woman whose mysterious past harbours many secrets. Jenny, unhappily married, is engaging in an affair. As the novel progresses, Stella's confessions lead Jenny to see parallels emerging between her present life and Stella's past. These parallels,

however, are proved to be false as the truth of their circumstances is revealed. Allusions to witchcraft and superstition abound in this book, which is set in rural England. Themes about deception, guilt and the power of secrets within families emerge against a background which questions, albeit with subtlety, the expectations of the British class system. The book has a very strong narrative which allows the reader to swap between the two stories, and the two story-tellers, without any sense of confusion. An entertaining and suspenseful read. ● BC

Likely to Die

by Linda Fairstein; Little, Brown 1997; 393 pp; \$19.95 softcover

Likely to Die is the follow up to Linda Fairstein's first crime novel released in Australia earlier this year. Once again the action centres on Assistant District Attorney Alexandra Cooper and the work of the Sex Crimes Unit she heads.

The plot involves the relatively predictable but intriguing staff conflicts and security problems at a major New York teaching hospital. Rather than the gruesome forensic detail of Patricia Cornwell, Fairstein uses her medical setting as an opportunity to examine unfettered ambition and its flipside, true vocation.

Fairstein faces a common problem for authors of crime pulp — seasoned

readers can spot a red herring as much by the number of pages left as by any narrative clues. *Likely to Die* is a good read more for the character development than any deftness in the whodunit structure.

I found some of the descriptions of sex crimes peripheral to the main plot gratuitous. I assume the author's intention is to educate the reading public about the scale of horror involved in many crimes against women but I think Fairstein is more effective in this aim when she's describing procedural matters such as prosecutors' tactics for putting victims at ease in the witness box.

A good stocking filler. ● FW

Alias Grace

by Margaret Atwood; Virago Press 1997; 545 pp; \$16.95 soft cover.

Margaret Atwood is a novelist whose work varies in quality more than any other writer I can think of. Her novels range from the subtle and powerful *Surfacing* to the superficial, page-turner *The Robber Bride*. *Alias Grace*, despite receiving great acclaim from people with as much literary cred as the Booker Prize Committee, leans towards the superficial. I was put off by its shallow

characterisation, particularly of the main character, Grace. One of the themes of the book is the way that women's lives are constrained by men's power and sexual destructiveness. Yet Grace herself is constrained as a character, without soul or complexity. Atwood has written another page-turner, but this is not great literature, nor even Atwood at her best. ● KO

idoru

by William Gibson; Penguin; 292 pp, \$14.95 softcover.

A return to form for Mr Gibson, after relinquishing his lead to the young SF Turks for the past few years. This is still not quite cutting edge, and could no longer be branded 'Hard', but it's an enjoyable read from an established master. In typical style, Gibson alternates between two tales that you know will slowly but surely merge into one tantalising conclusion. On the one hand we follow Chia, a young fan of a huge but secretive rock band known as Lo/Rez. On the other, we tag along with Laney, a cyberpunk with an affinity to see patterns in what appears to others as mush. And in the middle, the idoru of the title, who slowly emerges as cyber and real space are explored. If you've seen the stories about the totally virtual Japanese pop star, you'll immediately latch onto what Gibson is exploring.

One of the most interesting elements in the novel is that most of the things that Gibson describes already exist, or are close to being reality. Set in Japan, much of the technology and landscapes are plucked straight out of downtown Shinjuku and Shibuya. In fact, it reduces the impact of the novel a little if you have been to those places: if he is writing about the future, then we have arrived. Earlier this year, Gibson was asked on a radio talk show how he is able to predict the future. He replied that he didn't need to predict the future he just needed to find it because 'the future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed.' ● CM

Bits was compiled by Belinda Carman, Christian McGregor, Karen O'Connell and Frith Way.