

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE END OF
THE WASP
SEASON

A N O V E L B Y

denise mina

A CONVERSATION WITH DENISE MINA

One of my favorite things about your novels is how perfectly you nail the agonies of office politics, whether they're in a police station or a newsroom. Have you had experience with workplace horrors yourself?

I was very aware of office politics because I was so baffled by them. So much goes unsaid. No one says “you’re a cheeky so-and-so,” no one says “you’re so moody,” nobody ever confronts anyone else about anything.

But I’m very crass, and I’m very confrontational, and I have a temper. I had to be hypervigilant in every office I worked in.

Alex Morrow is very unhappy in the workplace, but she still works to get things done despite the roadblocks the system puts in front of her. Is that common among cops in Scotland?

Everyone I know who works for the police has become increasingly disillusioned and bitter.

Glasgow comes across as a tremendously dark and sad place in your novels set in the 1980s. The Alex Morrow novels show a more upscale Glasgow with havens for the rich, although there’s still plenty of grit to go around. What’s different about the city now?

Glasgow has changed hugely since I started writing, when it was like Detroit. It was the first city in Europe to regenerate itself through the arts, and there's been a huge amount of regeneration.

How have female detectives evolved in fiction over the past couple of decades?

At first, they had to act like men, carry guns, and punch people—be able to beat people up and engage in fisticuffs. In the mid-1990s, their gender was talked about a lot, and they experienced prejudice.

Now you've reached the point where a woman is just a different type of detective. You're not getting information just because you're a woman; it's not your superpower anymore. It's just a fact about who you are.

Alex Morrow isn't the friendliest of people. Are you attracted to people who have a bit of an attitude?

Alex just wants to do her job, and she's very angry.

I like rude women. I'm always mesmerized and admiring of quite rude women.

Are you a rude woman yourself?

I can be very rude, and when I was younger and scary-looking, people were very rude to me. But there's much less of that now. When you become famous, people are much nicer to you.

This article was written by Randy Dotinga and first appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor* (CSMonitor.com) on November 28, 2011.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What inspires Alex to change her mind and agree to help Danny by speaking to the psychologist about his son?
2. What is the significance of the bowl Kay Murray cherishes?
3. A theme throughout the novel is family and what you're willing to do for your flesh and blood. Which relationships did you think were strongest and which were weakest?
4. Morrow struggles with her police force's office politics. Why does she refuse to take a side and get involved? What are the difficulties she is facing?
5. Do you agree with Thomas that you never really know a person?
6. Discuss the presence of mental illness and instability in the Anderson family. How did that affect their relationships with one another?
7. What role does motherhood play in the book? How do the mothers in *The End of the Wasp Season* care for their children?

8. Is Thomas responsible for Sarah Erroll's death? How does Denise Mina make him a sympathetic character.
9. What role does class play in the novel? How does it affect the characters' perceptions? How does it affect their interactions with each other?
10. Discuss the dynamics between Morrow and Kay. How are they strong in their own ways? How do their differences put them at odds, despite their shared backgrounds?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denise Mina is the author of *Still Midnight*, *Slip of the Knife*, *The Dead Hour*, *Field of Blood*, *Deception*, and the Garnethill trilogy: *Garnethill*, *Exile*, and *Resolution*. She won the John Creasey Memorial Award for best first crime novel. She lives in Glasgow, Scotland, with her family.

...AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

In February 2013, Reagan Arthur Books will publish Denise Mina's *Gods and Beasts*, featuring Alex Morrow. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.

1

Martin Pavel heard it all as if through a pillow: the faint whine of ambulances, the helicopter murmur overhead, the muffled shouts of men in bulky uniforms, paramedics and cops shouting urgent instructions to each other—*Get that tape, move them back*. But it was bluster against a chaos long past. The chaos had sauntered casually out of the post office and walked off. Now the chaos was in the city somewhere, looking in shop windows, eating, maybe, watching TV, maybe, calm, certainly. Wherever the chaos was it was calm. Martin wished he was with it.

He was sitting on the curb, his legs splayed out into the Great Western Road. He saw the crowds gathered at the brink of the hill and down by the lights, craning to see, knowing that this number of police cars and the helicopter circling overhead meant something big had happened.

The traffic lights across the road changed, the red glow visible side-on. Martin realized with a start that it was dusk. The world was actually getting darker, it wasn't just his perception of it. He arched his back to take a deep breath and almost dislodged the

small boy koala-clamped to his chest. The boy faced in obstinately, squeezing, starting when anyone came near.

As the fog of shock began to lift, Martin remembered automatic fire, red explosions on the old man's back, the tilt of his torso, the greasy slide. Ambushed by the image, terrified at his reaction to it, he cupped the boy's head, pulled him in, tucking his jacket around his back.

The boy huddled in tight as Martin's field of vision turned green. A paramedic's uniform. The man knelt down in front of him, bobbing and weaving his head as he tried to catch Martin's eye: "Pal, pal, can you hear me?"

Martin managed a nod.

"Are you injured?"

He shook his head.

"And the wee man? Is your son hurt?"

Martin blinked slowly. "Not..." He opened his mouth to speak and the boy whimpered with fright, but Martin had to say it: "He's not my son."

"Who is he?"

Martin balked. The boy was his now, there was no changing that, but that wasn't what the man was asking. He twisted at the waist, thumbing back at the shattered post office window. Inside, it was splattered with red and black. "His."

The boy began to worm deeper into Martin's chest, crushing the breath from him.

Martin lifted his knees, fiercely pressing the boy into him, trying to steal him back from a world where your grandfather could do something like that.

Pushed in a canvas wheelchair, through the A&E waiting room; not very clean, not very nice. Not Caracas but not Cedars-Sinai either. A glass bulletproof box for the admission staff, chairs in

rows. The boy on his knee still, arms clamped around his neck, eyes shut tight.

Through a door. A tall woman was waiting to meet him. She was blond, gray suit. “I am DS Alex Morrow. I’ll come and talk to you soon.” Martin nodded. They moved on.

Into a corridor of curtained cubicles. The person pushing the chair parked them in a quiet corner, pulled a curtain around them, kicked the brakes on and went away.

Time passed. Clocks ticked and trolleys rolled. Nurses’ shoes squeaked by beyond the curtain.

The sudden sound of frantic footfalls, and a woman’s high voice: “Joseph?” The boy loosened his arms and legs, pushed himself out from Martin, listened for it again. “Joe!”

He clambered down from Martin’s lap, stood facing the curtain as if afraid to pull it back. He looked tiny and helpless and close to tears, this engine, and Martin’s hand rose towards him, needing him to come back. He dropped his hand quickly, remembering what a man craving the touch of a boy would look like, part of a generation brought up to suspect themselves.

He saw the boy shiver at the curtain, shoulders by his ears. On safari Martin had seen lions, hippos, even leopards, making kills, giving chase. He saw a hippo bite a lion’s leg off. Exciting, surprising, humbling even, but nothing compared to what he had seen today because today had been utterly needless.

The curtain yanked back. A red Puffa jacket, long, like a bloody sleeping bag. The small boy didn’t look up but stood, frozen, staring at the woman’s legs. “I’m sorry, Mummy.”

She fell to her knees, wrapped him up in her. She was hefty, thick around the hips—though the thick quilted coat wasn’t helping that—with a dark, fine face. They stayed there for a long time until the nurse coughed impatiently.

The mother looked up at Martin and her raw-eyed sorrow gave

way to horror. She pulled the boy out to look at him, spat furiously into her hand and rubbed at his face with her spittle. Martin looked at the back of his arm: he was covered in dried bloody freckles.

Smearing the blood into the boy's hair, she spat again, weeping and spitting. The nurse handed her a wet wipe. She scrubbed hard, shoving his head back on his neck, and his eyes rolled in ecstasy at her touch.

She stood up. Her sorrowful face was familiar to Martin and he realized then that the dead grandfather was her father, and that she had loved him very much.

The curtain fell shut and they were gone and Martin was left alone and cold and numb.

People spoke to one another out of sight. Telephones rang. Time ground past around him.

A young medic came to see him. She shone a pen torch into his eyes, looked in his ears, asked him if he had been hit on the head. He hadn't. He was in shock, she told him. She left.

A nurse came with a pill and he took it. It felt a little like his stepmother's Xanax, but fast. After a while it made everything feel softer. It was nice.

A different nurse appeared, cupped his elbow, prompting him to stand up. Tenderly, watching Martin's feet and making encouraging noises, she led him down the corridor, around a corner and into a small bright room with white walls and a dead computer on a desk.

The blond policewoman was there with a man. They stood up and introduced themselves: DS Morrow and DC Harris. They shook his hand.

They all sat down.

The policeman brought out a clipboard with photocopied sheets of questions. He was holding on to his bag as well as the board,

though, and when he sat down the board slipped from his hand, sliding towards the floor. He was unduly alarmed, his fingertips scrabbled to catch it and he grabbed at the paper, ripping the blank top sheet out from the metal clip.

They all watched the board drop to the floor, bounce on the corner and land face up, a filled-out form below: *Joseph Lyons, 9 Lallans*—the policeman's hand fell over the address. He picked it up, pulled out the ripped top of the blank sheet. His lips were bloodless with embarrassment. Martin didn't understand why it was such a big deal.

The woman took charge. She asked Martin to tell her what happened in the post office in the Great Western Road. Why did he go in there?

He was sending gifts home for the holidays.

Martin should have gone home by now but he couldn't face it. He used the excuse of fictitious exams and a fictitious local girlfriend. He was going to her fictitious parents' for Christmas lunch. They would split up in January. His parents would never know he'd made her up.

He didn't tell the cops any of that, just that he was Martin Pavel, twenty-one years old, a geology student at Glasgow University. He had been in the post office with two parcels to send home for Christmas.

"Where is home?"

San Francisco.

She looked skeptical. "In *America*?"

California.

"Did you grow up here, in Scotland?"

Martin shook his head.

"But you have a Scottish accent."

Aye.

She looked angry about that. "Where *are* you from?"

Here. As much as anywhere.

“But you didn’t grow up here and your family aren’t here . . .”

The questions were too complicated, the answers too wordy, and all he could think was he wanted the gunman to come here with his pistol and blow them away. He shook his head at the weight of it and the woman leaned forward, speaking softly to comfort him, when Martin knew he didn’t deserve it.

“Look, never mind. Forget that just now. In the post office, before, who else was there?”

The grandfather was right in front of him, holding hands with the boy.

The man had white hair, a square face like the mother who came for the boy. He wore a red Berghaus jacket with black shoulders and a red scarf. He was tan, like a Sicilian peasant, and his clothes were as well pressed as a Parisian’s, yet he spoke with a Glasgow accent.

Martin arrived at the back of the queue. He turned off his music and the boy smiled up at the grandfather and said, “Sausage rolls?” and the grandfather nodded seriously and said, “Of *course*, sausage rolls.”

Martin got stuck in that memory. Of course. *Of course*, sausage rolls. Internal goods, taking the matter of the sausage rolls very seriously.

“Did the old man seem nervous?”

No, because nervousness would denote uncertainty. He had none of that. He had given the boy to Martin with certainty, served the chaos, the gun-wielding barbarian, with a firm, dignified clarity. Martin wished it had been him who’d done it and he knew it was wrong to feel that way. He started to cry.

“Take your time,” said the woman, trying to hurry him.

He was calm, the grandfather. Very calm. *Of course*, sausage rolls. The boy smiled and turned away, looking over at a Happy

Christmas banner that had slipped its moorings on one side and was flapping languidly in the breeze from a fan heater.

Beyond them, a big queue snaked through the retractable ribbon barrier to the counters. Five, maybe six people: a tall guy in expensive cycling gear, very fit, orange cycling bag and a black peaked helmet. Jumpy, impatient, watching the clock. Another man beyond him maybe, and a woman towards the front. Martin was only vaguely aware of the queue because he began playing with his phone. Checking e-mails, deleting junk. A woman arrived, stood behind him. He didn't see her but he knew her hair was yellow. He had watched it turn pink in the bloody mist.

There were three serving counters open in the post office, out of a possible four. Martin was often in there because it was on the way to the library, and he had observed the family that ran it. The man he took to be the father was always working: an Asian man in his fifties, a salting of the hair at his temples, polite and industrious; the post office was open on Sundays too. The daughter had a feminized version of her father's face, thinner chin, long black hair and glittery barrettes. She was too old for barrettes.

A younger man, a cousin maybe, he didn't look like the father and daughter but they behaved like family members, stood close to each other and conversed in single word asides.

"When did you become aware of the gunman?"

Martin sat up straight as he remembered a figure in his peripheral vision stepping in through the post office door. Black clothes, a heavy canvas bag. It stepped sideways, behind the free-standing shelves of stationery just inside the door; it slid behind displays of birthday cards, crappy fridge magnets, teddy bears with tartan sashes, cheap shit.

Martin checked his phone again.

The figure stepped back out. And the bag was no longer heavy. The man walked to the front, striding straight past the queue. Cut-

ting the queue got everyone's attention, even before they noticed his pale gray mask, long before they noticed the curl of the AK-47 clip peeking past his thigh.

"In his right hand or left hand?"

He was holding it in his right hand, down by his right leg, away from the queue. It was a pistol.

"You said an AK-47..."

Yeah, but an AK-47 pistol.

"What's the difference, for someone who doesn't know much about guns?"

Pistol: shorter barrel, of course.

He wore a tightly fitted hunter's hood that covered his mouth and neck and head but not his eyes.

"With two holes for the eyes?"

No. It had one continuous hole. An oval. It was a hunter's hood. The cops didn't understand so Martin had to explain: it was made of fitted felt not knitted wool, tailored to fit around the chin and mouth, stop the prey smelling the hunter's breath. Martin had seen them when he was hunting in Canada.

The gunman walked to the front of the queue. The balaclava looked comfortable. And the eyes inside looked comfortable. That's what really struck Martin: this man was in control of his entire world but he wasn't anxious or doubting or searching for guidance. He wasn't attending a psychiatrist and weeping like a girl. He was comfortable.

"What do you mean by comfortable?"

Martin remembered those eyes. The man wasn't anxious. Not at all. The eyes were shining as he lifted the gun to his face. Deep blue eyes framed with white lashes.

The cyclist screamed. No one looked at him. They were hypnotized by the gunman. He raised his chin so his lips came to the brim of the eye hole and shouted, "*Get down on the fucking ground!*"

“What did he sound like?”

Greenock–Ayr-ish accent, lower working class. Spent a bit of time in Birmingham, England, maybe.

“Ayr-ish?”

Wide, open-mouthed vowels from the West Coast and the mellifluous lilt of a Birmingham accent. Also, he had a kind of roughness to his voice, as if he’d smoked a lot the night before, as if he’d hurt his throat shouting over music at a nightclub.

“What happened then?”

Everyone got down on the floor. They scabbled to the ground as if it was a race. They lay as flat as they could, noses pressed to the dirty wet floor, all of them. Except the grandfather. He stayed on his feet.

“How do you know that?”

Martin was nose-down on the floor when he saw the boy next to him, curled up walnut-tight, knees under his chest, fists over his mouth. The grandfather had shifted two steps away, so it looked as if the boy was with Martin.

He heard the grandfather mutter, “You?” like a question.

The gunman breathed, “*You.*”

A pause. The grandfather waited for the gunman to turn away and then he whispered to Martin, “*He’s yours.*”

Thinking back, Martin didn’t know if the grandfather was talking to him or the boy but, suddenly, he was part of their story.

“Who was part of what story?”

Martin, he was part of their story.

“Do you mean you felt detached before?”

No, but he had obligations to them because he was part of their story now. The policewoman looked blank. *Story*, he explained, we are in a story now. She looked skeptical.

“No, we’re not. This is real.”

He opened his mouth and shut it again. It was too much to ex-

plain, being Scottish from California, barbarians, and being in a story. She frowned, annoyed at him. “He said ‘he’s yours’ and what then?”

The old man stood, facing the gunman, fists tight at his side, Martin could only see up to his chest.

“Did you know the grandfather?”

Martin said he didn’t.

“Are you sure?”

Martin thought about it, his life before that moment. Gray streaks of time, lawyers, walks, heat and hills, palm trees, rats, and oranges and arguments. And then he remembered the grandfather, catching his eye in the queue, their eyes meeting, click, a blink, click, second look. Nothing. No hint of recognition.

Martin was sure he didn’t know him. He would have remembered the man. He was very tan and neat but very Scottish and Martin would have asked him why.

“He said ‘he’s yours’ and then?”

And then quiet, a deep, horrible quiet, until the gunman spoke again: “Fucking get out here, then.”

“He said it to the grandfather?”

Yeah.

“What did he mean by that?”

He meant come out here. He meant stand by me, feel the glorious heat of me. He meant come here and help me and then I’ll kill you.

“And what did the old man do?”

Martin told them what he had seen: *fucking get out here*. The old man’s loafer heels lifted off the ground in response, as if he was saluting: a soldier chosen for a glorious mission. The heels of the leather loafers were metal-tipped for long wear, made a loud tick-tack when they hit the floor.

One loafer stepped high, across the cyclist, who was sobbing into the ground, over the people and the bags sprawled on the floor.

Martin's eyes followed the feet until they stood a foot away from the black trainers at the counter. The gunman handed the canvas bag to the grandfather and the old man held it open for him.

"He willingly helped the guy?"

Martin didn't answer. Of course he helped him. She hadn't been there. Martin wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't witnessed it himself.

"Where were you then?"

The question flicked him back to the sound of the boy panting face down into the wet smears from the street. For no reason, Martin lifted his arm over the kid's back and pulled him over and in, until their foreheads were pressed tight together. The boy looked at him with emotionless brown eyes. Martin looked back and they blinked at each other, anchored, hearing the world beyond but seeing nothing. Martin was an only child and a lonely child. Lying on the dusty floor, looking at the boy, he had never felt closer to anyone. The gunman had done that for them.

Behind them, in a far-off place, the gunman ordered the counter staff to get out here, not you, you stay. People moved. Doors opened. Doors shut. The world was reordered at his command.

A voice behind the counter, muffled by the thickened safety glass.

"Move it," said the gunman.

And then he must have hit the glass because thunder shook the room and everyone on the floor jerked with fright.

"Don't fucking bother, it's *still* cut off."

Martin was sure about the wording. The policewoman asked him to repeat it and he did—*it's still cut off*. The man got angry about it. "Aye, *still*, don't try and fucking trick me!" He got angrier and angrier and then he shouted, "You! Get over there and smack her."

A pause.

Then the sound of the old man's feet tick-tacking down the shop. The weight in the feet shifted, soles grinding against the dirty floor, and the heavy sound of a slap followed by a woman's shocked yelp. He was making them attack each other and Martin felt his enjoyment of that.

The boy's eyes shut, just once, a slow blink, taking ownership of his grandfather's hand.

"Bring it out." Doors open, feet moving. The drag of a bag over the gritty floor.

Then both sets of feet, clip-clop loafers, squelchy soles on the robber's sneakers, moved toward the exit. Martin's breath quickened at the memory and what was coming next.

The door clicked open, a shrieking hinge, and the cold draft from the street hurtled across the floor, picking up dust and flinging it in his hair. He blinked hard to break eye contact with the boy, and rolled his head to the door to see if they had gone.

But they were still inside, quite far away down the shop now, and Martin could see them clearly. Between them and him, the blond woman lay on her stomach, face turned to Martin, tears seeping through her tightly shut eyes.

The two men faced each other in front of the open door.

"How tall was the gunman compared with the grandfather?"

He was tall, maybe six foot one or two. He was wearing a black sweatshirt with no logo on it and dark jeans and black trainers. Cheap, battered clothes, but his pose was elegant, like a rakish cowboy. The policewoman asked him to explain and Martin stood up to show her: the gunman stood with his pelvis forward, the butt of the gun resting on his right hip bone, barrel pointing skyward, holding it with one hand. Martin stood and looked up at the wall in the nondescript room, enjoying mimicking him, felt the wave of his spine and knew how relaxed and certain he would need to be to stand like this. He looked up to where the old man would have been and felt,

for just a sliver of time, that he could see him there. Then she spoke again and spoiled it:

“Why was he standing like that?”

Martin sat back down. He gathered himself, lost the dumbassed grin. It’s the weight, he explained. In those guns all the weight is at the front so you tip them when you hold them one-handed. Martin stopped. He’d gotten carried away and his accent was sliding across the Atlantic, swooshing up over towering waves, skimming the black-blue valleys, homing to nowhere. He stopped and was lost.

The woman prompted him. “Who had the bag? Who had the bag at this point?”

The gunman had it in his other hand, he had the holdall with whatever they had taken. It didn’t look heavy or especially full. It was a pittance, really. Martin didn’t think it was about the money.

The grandfather was holding the door open.

Martin felt suddenly exhausted as he remembered the old man’s stance: upright, shoulders back, as dignified as an Upper East Side doorman with fifty years’ service. But his chin was bobbing on his chest because he was crying. Martin felt that he knew what was going to happen and he just stood there, crying.

The barrel of the pistol lowered to point at his chest.

The sound of the first shot hit Martin’s ear and fire flashed in the barrel. He was shocked by how loud it was. He had never heard a gun go off without ear protectors. Too loud to hear, not a bang but a painfully loud *phut* slapping his inner ear.

Fire in the chamber, and *phut phut phutphutphut phutphutphut-phut*, ten rounds, cartridges flying everywhere, glittering brass cartwheeling joyfully through the air.

Martin saw exit wound after exit wound exploding out of the old man’s back, red mist puffing out of him, landing on cards and turning the sobbing blonde’s hair pretty princess pink.

Suddenly, the glass wall onto the street shattered milky white.

Then quiet.

The old man's jaw dropped open. His body listed to the side, shoulders twisting to face the door, as if he was showing the people in the shop the cratered flesh of his back. Then it sort of slid, the torso, slid off the legs towards the door and the legs and pelvis fell forwards.

Martin lost his breath at the memory but a tiny hand, like a fleshy spider, flattened on his cheek: the boy had reached through the space under his neck. It pulled Martin's face back around, ordering him to look. *I am still here. Now we are in a story together.*

Grateful, Martin was met by the boy's brown eyes and they stayed there.

The savior hand stayed on his cheek for a long time, until the police arrived and screamed at them to get up.

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM DENISE MINA

Still Midnight

An Alex Morrow novel

“Beguiling...Mina’s characterization is superb.”

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ALSO AVAILABLE FROM DENISE MINA

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