

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

# RESURRECTION MEN

An Inspector Rebus Novel by

IAN RANKIN



# An Introduction to Detective Inspector John Rebus

The first novels to feature John Rebus, a flawed but resolutely humane detective, were not an overnight sensation, and success took time to arrive. But the wait became a period that allowed Ian Rankin to come of age as a crime writer, and to develop Rebus into a thoroughly believable, flesh-and-blood character straddling both industrial and postindustrial Scotland — a gritty yet perceptive man coping with his own demons. As Rebus struggled to keep his relationship with his daughter, Sammy, alive following his divorce, and to cope with the imprisonment of his brother Michael, while all the time trying to strike a blow for morality against a fearsome array of sinners (some justified and some not), readers began to respond enthusiastically. Fans admired Ian Rankin's re-creation of a picture-postcard Edinburgh with a vicious tooth-and-claw underbelly just a heartbeat away, his believable but at the same time complex plots, and, best of all, his portrayal of Rebus as a conflicted man trying always to solve the unsolvable, and to do the right thing.

As the series progressed, Ian Rankin refused to shy away from contentious issues such as corruption in high places, pedophilia, and illegal immigration, combining his unique seal of tight plotting with a bleak realism leavened with brooding humor.

In Rebus the reader is presented with a rich and constantly evolving portrait of a complex and troubled man, irrevocably tinged with the sense of being an outsider and, potentially, unable to escape being a “justified sinner” himself. Rebus's life is intricately related to his Scottish environs, too, enriched by Ian Rankin's attentive depiction of locations and careful regard to Rebus's favorite music, watering holes, and books, as well as his often fraught relationships

with colleagues and family. And so, alongside Rebus, the reader is taken on a sometimes painful, occasionally hellish journey to the depths of human nature, always rooted in the minutiae of a very recognizable Scottish life.

## For General Discussion Regarding the Rebus Series

1. How does Ian Rankin reveal himself as a writer interested in using fiction to “tell the truths the real world can’t”?
2. There are similarities between the lives of the author and his protagonist — for instance, both Ian Rankin and John Rebus were born in Fife, lost their mothers at an early age, enjoy a drink, and have children with physical problems. Is it in any way useful to think of John Rebus as Ian Rankin’s alter ego?
3. Could it be said that Rebus is trying to make sense in a general way of the world around him, or is he seeking answers to the “big questions”? Is it relevant that he is a believer in God and comes from a Scottish Presbyterian background? Would Rebus see confession in the religious and the criminal senses as similar?
4. How does Ian Rankin explore notions of Edinburgh as a character in its own right? In what way does he contrast the glossily public and seedily private faces of the city with the public and private faces of those Rebus meets?
5. How does Ian Rankin use musical sources — the Elvis references in *The Black Book*, for instance, or the Rolling Stones allusions in *Let It Bleed*—as a means of character development through the series? What does Rebus’s own taste in music and books say about him as a person?

6. What is your impression of Rebus? If you have read more than one of the Rebus novels, discuss how his character has developed.
7. If Rebus has a problem with notions of “pecking order” and the idea of authority generally, what does it say about him that he chose careers in hierarchical institutions such as the army and then the police?
8. How does Rebus relate to women — as lovers, flirtations, family members, and colleagues?
9. Do the flashes of gallows humor shown by the pathologists but sometimes also in Rebus’s own comments increase or dissipate narrative tension? Does Rebus use black comedy for the same reasons the pathologists do?
10. Do Rebus’s personal vulnerabilities make him understanding of the frailties of others?
11. How does Rebus compare to other long-standing popular detectives created by British writers, such as Holmes, Poirot, Morse, or Dalgleish? Are there more similarities or differences among them?

## A Note about *Resurrection Men*

Detective Inspector Rebus, sent to Tulliallan Police College for retraining after blowing up at DCS Gill Templer in the squad room, finds himself among other Resurrection Men, those who have broken the rules too often and aren't team players, and who as punishment are now set to work through an old unsolved case. Although Rebus is curious about the dynamics of the group, he's just as pre-occupied by the recent murder of Edward Marber, an art dealer, and the mystery of a stolen Vettriano painting.

There's a bigger shock in store, however, when the dormant case the Resurrection Men are allocated turns out to be that of Rico Lomax, killed six years earlier. Rebus had been involved with that inquiry — not that he's about to reveal his own connection if he can help it. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Rebus knows that if he solves the Lomax case it could be his ruin — and when he sets a lure to flush out some dirty cops, he's shocked by how quickly events escalate out of control. Will he be able to emerge unscathed from the melee? And anyway, just where has the swag gone that belonged to one Bernie Johns, a gangster stabbed to death in Barlinnie Prison?

It's not all beer and skittles for Siobhan Clarke either, even though she's been newly promoted to DS, as she sees there's a link between Marber and Big Ger Cafferty. With Rebus otherwise engaged, it falls to Siobhan to interview the criminal Mr. Big of Edinburgh. All in all, someone is being set up, and it's really not very clear who it is.

Ian Rankin says of his writing, "Not that books have to be 'true'

necessarily; all they have to be is realistic,” and the drab but fascinating glimpse into the real-life setting in the Scottish Police College at Tulliallan exploits this comment.

In 2004 *Resurrection Men* won the Edgar Award for best novel of the year.

## Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. “Resurrection men” is a term that was once used to refer to grave robbers. Consider other implications the title may have.
2. “John just prefers things done the old-fashioned way. Isn’t that right, John?” says one of the Resurrection Men. Is this a fair statement about Rebus?
3. One of Rebus’s fellow recidivists makes the point that the police bosses need the Resurrection Men more than the Resurrection Men need them. Is this a forlorn hope?
4. How ethical is the police’s treatment of the Weasel?
5. Siobhan and Rebus have to work independently in this case. How does Ian Rankin rise to the challenge of narrating parallel investigations? Could the structure of *Resurrection Men* fairly be described as complicated?
6. What is the act that Sir David Strathern says Rebus has spent years perfecting?
7. If you’ve read other Rebus novels: In which ways is this a different kind of investigation from the ones Rebus is usually involved in?
8. Why does Siobhan’s remedy for sleeplessness make Rebus smile?



9. “Make sure you know whose side you’re on.” Whose side is Rebus on? Whom does he trust more than Claverhouse?
10. Discuss how Ian Rankin explores in *Resurrection Men* the idea of “crossing the line” and who might have a tendency to do so.
11. How much of an accident is it likely to be that Rebus utters, innocently, a phrase that’s also the title of a crime novel by another Scottish crime writer, Christopher Brookmyre?
12. In what ways does Ian Rankin indicate a move in the relationship of Rebus and Siobhan from colleagues to friends?
13. “He thought of Siobhan. More and more she reminded him of himself. He wasn’t sure it was necessarily a good thing, but was glad of it all the same.” Why does Rebus feel glad?
14. Does Rebus experience a resurrection of sorts in this novel?