

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

A QUESTION OF BLOOD

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 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?

4 READING GROUP GUIDE

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 *A Question of Blood*

Yet again Rebus finds himself in hot water: a man who'd been stalking DS Siobhan Clarke turns up burned to death, and Rebus has suspicious burn wounds on his hands, which means that now he's facing the wrath of an internal inquiry. Meanwhile there's been a slaughter at a private school in South Queensferry, where an ex-army gunman has killed two pupils and gravely wounded another. The injured boy, James, has vociferous SMP Jack Bell as his father, a man with his own issues against the police. To make matters worse, Rebus realizes that he himself is related to one of the schoolboy victims.

As Miss Teri allows surreptitious webcam peeks into her bedroom and her Goth friends try to look enigmatic, and while the schoolboy Combined Cadet Force runs around in military garb and the Lost Boys gang wanders the streets looking for trouble, Rebus begins to see that the world of teenagers is as alien to him as anything could be. As inexplicable perhaps as the need in 1995 for a covert SAS salvage operation on the remote Scottish Isle of Jura, something that gunman Lee Herdman may have talked about with friend Doug Brimson, a flying instructor who has caught Siobhan's eye and who seems to know rather too much about corporate jollies.

In *A Question of Blood* Rebus must ask himself about how he treats his own family, and why he seems to be carelessly discarding family ties. But as these bonds loosen, he and Siobhan appear to be taking their professional relationship to a new level.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Ian Rankin says, “The Rebus novels have always examined Edinburgh’s dual identity, its Jekyll and Hyde nature. Private education is part of the city’s fabric, but also a contentious issue in some quarters.” How is this assertion explored in *A Question of Blood*?
2. Discuss Rebus’s relationship with Jean Burchill. How has it changed?
3. How is the price DCS Gill Templar is paying for climbing the career ladder showing? What does Siobhan feel about this? What does it mean that Siobhan is now suffering from panic attacks?
4. “Fear: the crucial word. Most people would live their whole lives untouched by crime, yet they still feared it, and that fear was real and smothering. The police force existed to allay such fears, yet too often was shown to be fallible, powerless, on hand only after the event, clearing up the mess rather than preventing it.” In your opinion, does this passage reflect an overly cynical view?
5. Parallel to Rebus’s work is an army investigation, ostensibly into Lee Herdman’s actions. What is actually whetting the two investigators’ appetites? Is Rebus as irritated by their presence as he is by old adversaries Claverhouse and Ormiston from *Drugs* and *Major Crime*? What do they all think of Rebus?

6. The novel's title has a double meaning: blood as in lifeblood, blood as in familial ties. Consider the implications of this punning.
7. Why has Rebus lost touch with his brother Michael?
8. Discuss Lee Herdman's motivations. Why did he act as he did?
9. Bearing in mind their similar army backgrounds, is Lee Herdman the criminal that Rebus is arguably most like, personality-wise, throughout the Rebus series?
10. What is it about Wee Evil Bob that makes Rebus treat him with compassion? Is it an unrecognized fatherly impulse?
11. Does Siobhan have a poor instinct about men when it comes to her own personal relationships? How does she put herself in jeopardy?
12. Who is probably the most surprised at what happens after Rebus finds Siobhan alive?
13. Does Ian Rankin leave the climax open-ended as to what James Bell might do?
14. Is *A Question of Blood* a "fun" book to read, as the author claims?