

**BACK BAY · READERS' PICK**

**READING GROUP GUIDE**

# **THE NAMING OF THE DEAD**

**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 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 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, 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 by 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 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 Rankin and John Rebus were born in Fife, lost their mother at an early age, enjoy a drink, and have children with physical problems. Is it in any way useful to think of Rebus as 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 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 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, objects of flirtation, 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 Dalgliesh? Are there more similarities or differences among them?

## A NOTE ABOUT *THE NAMING OF THE DEAD*

Many feelings are stirred in John Rebus when his younger brother, Michael, dies unexpectedly from a massive stroke. However, Rebus doesn't have time to reflect too much as Edinburgh is in the final run-up to the G8 summit on world poverty that will be attended by leaders from far and wide, watched by a motley crew of supporters and anarchists, and the police are gearing themselves up for the massive effort of making Operation Sorbus (code name of the policing plan for the G8 week) run smoothly.

But DS Siobhan Clarke is convinced that a serial killer is also hard at work, leaving trophies of various victims at a number of unexpected public places. Amid all the flurry, Rebus believes himself the only cop his superiors *don't* need, especially when Siobhan is put in charge of *him*, but he is intrigued nevertheless by the fact that one of the victims, Cyril Colliar, had been in the employ of Big Ger Cafferty, because of course Rebus would love to get one last chance at Cafferty in the final months before his retirement . . .

Perhaps most perplexing of all is MP Ben Webster's suicide plunge from the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle during an official dinner for bigwigs, which turns out to be another tragedy for his already grieving family. Elsewhere, the BeastWatch website is proving a fertile hunting ground for a vigilante, while an emotionally vulnerable police officer blunders about, caught up in her own confusion.

As Rebus and Siobhan try to bring a killer to book, it looks as if their investigation may be scuppered by things they cannot control: deliberate actions and silly rivalries between the different law-enforcement agencies that have converged on Scotland for G8, and

that want any extraneous trouble swept under the carpet so as not to divert attention from the hoped-for success of the summit.

In *The Naming of the Dead* Ian Rankin frames the story between two real-life events during the summer of 2005—the G8 summit and the London bombings—giving the novel an arguably more somber tone than usual, although one that aptly reflects Rebus’s mood as retirement approaches.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Family relationships of various sorts occasionally come to the foreground in *The Naming of the Dead*. Discuss the implications for Rebus and for Siobhan of the inexorable “tug of family.”
2. Siobhan’s parents are described as being of the same generation as Rebus. Does their presence remind her uncomfortably of the age difference between Rebus and herself?
3. “Rebus knew his place in the food-chain: somewhere down amongst the plankton, the price for years of insubordination and reckless conduct.” How true is this statement?
4. At the peace camp Siobhan finds herself in a world unlike the one she’s used to. To what extent is she able to blend in with the people she encounters?
5. Real celebrities and politicians are glimpsed in *The Naming of the Dead*. If you’ve read other Rebus novels, do you think the presence in the novel of these famous real-world figures affects Ian Rankin’s usual narrative style in any way?
6. How important is the detailed countdown to G8? Does it add poignancy, given the knowledge that July 7, 2005, was the date of the real-life London bombings, which are also acknowledged in the story?



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7. What are the implications of the developing relationship between Siobhan and Cafferty? Might it make Rebus, in some way, feel a bit jealous?
8. Discuss the different types of victims in *The Naming of the Dead*. Why is their naming so important, and what is Rebus's response?
9. Discuss Siobhan's reaction to her mother's being injured during the march.
10. "She'd nodded, given him a wink and a smile. Gestures she'd learned from him, used whenever he was planning on crossing the line." Is Siobhan planning on crossing the line?
11. Consider the portrait of Edinburgh that emerges in *The Naming of the Dead*. How does it differ from the way Edinburgh is portrayed in other Rebus stories?
12. What provokes Siobhan into ringing her parents and arranging to see them? Is it fear of becoming like Rebus?
13. Even Cafferty is taken aback by the bombings. Is this because it's a case of "new" crime versus "old" crime?
14. Is there an element of natural justice in Rebus's actions that close the book?