



The Death of Kings

Rennie Airth

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In the fifth novel in the John Madden mystery series, Inspector Madden is called upon to assist Scotland Yard on a notorious decade-old murder case.

On a hot summer day in 1938, a beautiful actress is murdered on the grand Kent estate of Sir Jack Jessup, close friend of the Prince of Wales. An instant headline in the papers, the confession of a local troublemaker swiftly brings the case to a close, but in 1949, the reappearance of a jade necklace raises questions about the murder. Was the man convicted and executed the decade before truly guilty, or had he wrongly been sent to the gallows?

Inspector Madden is summoned out of retirement at the request of former Chief Inspector Angus Sinclair to re-open the case at Scotland Yard. Set in the aftermath of World War II, *The Death of Kings* is an atmospheric and captivating police procedural, and is a story of honor and justice that takes Madden through the idyllic English countryside, post-war streets of London, and into the criminal underworld of the Chinese Triads.

The Death of Kings Details

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From Reader Review The Death of Kings for online ebook

Jim Angstadt says

The Death of Kings (John Madden #5)
Rennie Airth

This is my third John Madden. He is now retired, but as a favor to an old friend, Madden looks into a potential miscarriage of justice. So He is back in harness, weighing possibilities, evaluating means and motive and personality, much as he has done in the other books.

Perhaps too much. Many of the characters are stereotypes. The dialog is predictable and gets more tiresome with time.

I remember liking the first in the series. The second was not quite as memorable. And now this. Time to give this series a rest.

Kathy says

This is a very sedate British murder mystery, post World War II. John Madden and family are working on moving out of inherited house so John can concentrate on being a farmer and his wife Helen can concentrate on being a doctor. The plan includes finding a rental flat in London for daughter Lucy to move to. In spite of these projects, John is asked to "look into" a 10-year old murder that his retired Scotland Yard Superintendent friend and neighbor is not comfortable about. "The trouble is this all happened ten years ago. The people who were in the house that week-end, staff and guests, are mostly scattered; and as you'll see from the file, some of them are dead." Someone had sent an anonymous letter with a necklace in the envelope and was attempting to have the murder of a young woman at a country house party investigated even though someone had confessed and paid the price for the crime by hanging. For this reason, as well as other active projects, John's new look at the crime was taken up slowly.

The pace was measured and allowed for a friendship to develop between John and the host of that ill-fated house party from ten years earlier. Helen also found a new friend in the efforts made to uncover the truth. There is a great deal of family warmth exhibited by the Maddens, enjoyable to read - as well as interesting descriptions of conditions in London as a result of the bombings, rations and the attention given to Helen's Morris Minor.

There is slow but steady progress made by Scotland Yard, forced to reopen the case due to photographs that were sent to sensationalist newspapers. I find that I cannot describe those threads without giving away too much. I did describe this book as sedate, so I feel I had better admit that there are a couple of beheadings within these pages. You have been warned.

Gram says

Another John Madden mystery from the wonderful Rennie Airth, but I felt this one to be too slow to keep me glued to the page and I found myself skipping a few pages of what I thought was inconsequential dialogue. Still, a decent old-style mystery.

Leah says

A new take on the Golden Age...

When retired policeman Tom Derry receives an anonymous letter enclosing a jade pendant that the writer claims belonged to a murder victim, he discusses it with Angus Sinclair, who had worked with him on the original investigation. Sinclair is worried – at the back of his mind he had always had doubts about the guilt of the man convicted and hanged for the crime. Not well enough to look into the matter himself, Sinclair asks his old friend John Madden to check things out.

Now in 1949, Madden is retired too, but he still has contacts in the force, not least Billy Styles who used to be his subordinate but is now a detective inspector. The murder took place back in 1938, when a small-time actress, Portia Blake, was a guest at a house-party. She went out for a walk in the woods, and her body was later discovered, strangled. A man with a previous conviction for attempted rape was in the vicinity and suspicion soon fell on him, and after interrogation he confessed. As a result, the investigation was quickly wrapped up and other possible solutions were never checked. So it's up to Madden to track down the people who were there that weekend, and see if anyone else had a motive...

I've always enjoyed the Madden books, and this is an excellent addition to the series. They are somewhat quieter and slower than most modern crime novels, relying on the quality of the writing and the carefully created post-war setting to carry them. There is most definitely a Golden Age feel to them, quite intentionally, I think, though they are at the more thoughtful end of the Golden Age, or perhaps in the slightly later tradition of PD James.

In this one, we have the country house party, a rather upper class list of suspects, a traditional style of investigation carried out mostly through interviews of the various people who were there at the time, and a restricted time period for the murder, making alibi an important feature. There is also a connection to the Chinese Triads through one of the suspects – a half-Chinese man from Hong Kong. Normally I'd run a mile from a story about the Triads – not my thing at all – but I'm delighted to say that, while it's an important element of the story, it's somewhat understated and isn't allowed to overwhelm the other features. At heart this is a traditional detective story, and the Triad storyline feels realistic within that.

In the last couple of books, I've lightly criticised the fact that much of the investigation is carried out off-stage, so to speak, with information being given to the reader via police officers talking to each other. I'm delighted to say this one doesn't take that approach – it goes back to the, in my opinion, much more satisfying style of Madden actually getting out and about and talking to people himself. This makes the characterisation of the suspects much better developed, which consequently meant I felt more invested in the outcome. It also allows for deepening of Madden's own character, since we see the investigation proceed from his perspective, though in third person.

The old regulars are here too – Angus Sinclair, curmudgeonly with gout, but his brain still sharp; Billy Styles, still faithful to his old mentor; Lily Poole, the lone female detective in this man's world. I've always liked the way Airth deals with Lily – she is strong and intelligent, but not feminist in the strident sense, and the sexism she encounters isn't ill-meant – just a true reflection of how things were back then. She realises it's an unfair world but does her best to progress within the existing rules rather than constantly kicking against them. And Airth always lets her have a major impact on the investigation without it ever feeling forced or unrealistic for the time. Madden's family is here too – his wife, Helen, able to cast some light on some of the suspects from her days as a society girl, and his daughter, Lucy, now a young woman, constantly

sticking her nose in and gossiping about the case, but doing it all with a lot of charm.

The solution relies a little too much on Madden getting a sudden intuition, but otherwise it's both dark and satisfying. Airth includes the kind of class element that is so often present in Golden Age books, with the rather upper-class old school policemen tending to protect those of their own background; but he has Billy Styles comment on it, suggesting that winds of change are about to shake up the way policing is done in this post-war world. Altogether, an absorbing, rather slow-paced novel, but with excellent timing so that it holds the reader's attention throughout. This would work fine as a standalone, with enough background given to each of the regulars to let new readers understand how they relate to each other, but as with any series it's probably best to read them in order, starting with River of Darkness. 4½ stars for me, so rounded up.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Mantle (Pan MacMillan).

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Tony Parsons says

8/1938, Portia Blake (actress) had been murdered at the grand Kent estate of Sir Jack "Black Jack" Jessup (1/2 oriental).

The Canterbury PD had arrested Owen Norris (hop picker, farm worker), convicted, put in prison & later executed him for Portia's murder.

1949, DCS Charlie Chubb DI was discussing the past murder case with DI Billy Styles & John Madden (retired DI, Scotland Yard, Metropolitan PD).

Tom Derry (retired DCS CID) it seems had acquired a necklace that everyone assumed had once belonged to Portia.

The closed case was reopened & the investigation began again.

What happened to Rex Garner?

Is Mr. Stanley Wing (Liang, Triad gang member) a suspect?

Will Portia's murderer every be brought to justice?

I did not receive any type of compensation for reading & reviewing this book. While I receive free books from publishers & authors, I am under no obligation to write a positive review. Only an honest one.

A very awesome book cover, great font & writing style. Wow, a very well written who-dun-it murder mystery book. It was very easy for me to read/follow from start/finish & never a dull moment. There were no grammar/typo errors, nor any repetitive or out of line sequence sentences. Lots of exciting scenarios, with several twists/turns & a great set of unique characters to keep track of. This could also make another great who-dun-it murder mystery movie, or better yet a mini TV series. A very easy rating of 5 stars.

Thank you for the free Goodreads; MakingConnections; Penguin Random House LLC.; (Viking Books);

AUCP; paperback book

Tony Parsons MSW (Washburn)

Beata says

Another good novel with John Madden investigating in post-WW2 a murder which was comitted just before

the war and for which an innocent person convicted. Rennie Airth's intrigue is good, however, this book didn't keep me on the edge of my seat.

LJ says

First Sentence: When she heard the stair creak beneath her foot, Portia stopped and stood frozen.

In 1938, at the estate of Sir Jack Jessup, a friend of the Prince of Wales, an actress is murdered. An ex-convict is arrested, confesses, and is hanged. But was he really the killer? In 1949, the reappearance of a necklace raises questions. Although the police aren't interested in re-opening the case, former CI Angus Sinclair persuades his former Inspector, John Madden to pursue the investigation.

Although it's been four years since Airth's last book, he certainly hasn't lost his touch. He also does an admirable job of catching readers, new and old, up with the characters, particularly of Madden and his family, and of the post-war period—"No matter how many times he visited Rotterdam...the sight of the devastation wrought by the German bombers in 1940 never ceased to impress..." A significant change brought about by the war was the introduction of the National Health Service.

Airth transports one to England by his descriptions of people and his dialogue. It is nice to have a protagonist with a solid family life—"Recently [his wife] had taken to wearing spectacles for reading and it was a source of wonder to Madden to see how a pair of simple horn-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose somehow added a new dimension to a face that had never ceased to hold him in thrall."

There are excellent revelations and twists through the story, but so well and subtly done as not to feel at all contrived. An interesting shift, the explanation of an expression, and an evocative description all move the story forward nicely.

One can very much appreciate that all the police work well together. It is particularly gratifying that Lily, the female police officer who is a fairly new addition to the force, is treated with respect. That said, all the characters are fully developed and interesting.

When Airth does suspense, he does it well. The pace picks up significantly in the last third of the book when situations become dangerous and dramatic with red herrings nicely done. The reader is inclined to realize the guilty party just as Madden does.

"The Death of Kings" is a very good read from a very good author.

THE DEATH OF KINGS (Pol Proc-John Madden-England-1949) – VG+
Airth, Rennie – 5th in series
Viking – 2017

Mal Warwick says

South African author Rennie Airth has written seven novels, five of which feature Detective Inspector John Madden. The Death of Kings is the fifth. Set largely in southern England in 1949, The Death of Kings brings John Madden's story well into his retirement from Scotland Yard. He now makes his home in the

countryside with his wife Helen and adult daughter Lucy.

Though retired, Madden has lost none of his taste for mystery. A request from his old friend and former boss, Angus Sinclair, reawakens his instincts as a detective and sends him out on an unauthorized investigation into an 11-year-old murder. A flashy young actress had been killed in the midst of a weekend-long party attended by “the Duke of Wales’ set.” Angus had closed the case in quick order. A wandering farmhand had confessed, been convicted, and later hanged. But Angus now fears that the wrong man had been punished for the crime. Since he’s immobilized with gout, he has asked Madden to take another look at the case.

The story’s setting, and the circumstances it describes, are worth the price of the book. Post-war England is a brilliant illustration of the folly of war. Four years after the end of World War II, London, Canterbury, and other cities still lie in ruins. The British Empire is breaking up. Severe rationing of meat, gasoline, and other goods is still in effect in England. Despite the democratizing effect of the war, and the efforts of the Labour Party, the traditional class distinctions are still very much in evidence. As a snapshot of post-war England, *The Death of Kings* works well.

The novel works reasonably well as detective fiction, too. For a time, the story appears to devolve into a simple whodunit. Guests at the posh party begin to come under suspicion. But then the tale becomes more complicated. Much more so. The suspense builds steadily. Even if you guess the culprit less than halfway through the book, as I did, you’re likely to enjoy the ride to the end.

Incidentally, the title, *The Death of Kings*, is from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. But it’s difficult to see the connection with the story.

Roger Taylor says

Having enjoyed previous books in the Madden series, I looked forward to reading this one but did not enjoy it as much as the earlier ones...perhaps because the pace was rather slow and the result more predictable but it is still a worthwhile crime series and hopefully, the next one will be up to the standards set in the earlier works.

Mary says

A good book. I knew who the murderer was from the moment he “entered the stage”, as it were. And I had to re-read quite a few of the characteristic run-on sentences to be sure of their meaning. But it was still a very good book, very interesting plot.

Melliott says

I enjoyed this. I read Airth's other four books about John Madden so long ago that I was worried I wouldn't be able to follow, but he has a nice way of reminding you what came before without bringing the current story to a halt, and I easily recognized most of the individual characters I had encountered in the previous books.

It's interesting to read a mystery that is not overtly historical fiction (like, say, *The Yard*, by Alex Grecian),

but is nonetheless set in an earlier time. You have to keep reminding yourself of things like the exponentially slower modes of transportation and information dispersal. You also have to remember the inborn current prejudices of people at that time, in that place. It's a good reminder, though. We all need to get out of the habit of thinking that things have always been the way they are, and experience the way they used to be.

There were a few good red herrings in this, and although I began to suspect the truth before Madden got to it, it wasn't by much. Nicely done.

Cara says

[telling Sir Richard that Garner was murdered, and didn't commit suicide, even though Madden knew the police didn't want that revealed until the in

Tony says

THE DEATH OF KINGS. (2017). Rennie Airth. ***.

The victim in this latest mystery from Airth was Portia Blake. She was strangled and left in a small farm building just a little ways from the main manor house. Two days later, a man was apprehended who had items of Portia's jewelry in his possession, and ultimately confessed to the killing. He later reneged on his confession, but the judge and jury weren't having any of that. He was convicted of the murder and subsequently hung. Eleven years later, an anonymous letter was received at police headquarters along with a jade necklace that was definitely known to belong to Portia. The letter implied that the police and the authorities had convicted and hung the wrong man. Through a series of favors being repaid, John Madden, Airth's series protagonist is asked to look into the case to see if he could get enough evidence to have the case reopened. At this time, in 1948, Madden was now retired from the force and was ready to do something to make his life more interesting. Unfortunately, he didn't manage to make the reader's life more interesting. The novel embarked on a series of interviews of all the people present at the manor during the time of the murder. Several of the guests and the help had already passed on – thank God – so the interviewing procedure was somewhat shortened. What we are subjected to are interminable sessions of interviews of the earlier guests, spewing out in dribs and drabs what little they could remember about that night eleven years ago. After a while, the procedure becomes boring. Madden tries to liven up the process by inserting the occasional "Ah, ha!", but that wasn't enough to wake me up. The trail leads Madden to several potential suspects, one of whom is involved with the Chinese Tongs and has a checkered past. By the time I reached the end it couldn't have come soon enough. I find that some occasional action helps to keep my attention. There was little enough action in this book. It runs at about the pace of a lesser known Wilkie Collins novel. What's one to do, however? When the series hero retires and tries to get back in the good graces of his former organization, he is forced to take on cold cases – those cases that also leave a chilled path up and down the reader's spine.

Gatorman says

Plodding entry in the John Madden series about the reopening of a years-old murder investigation for which a potentially innocent man was hanged. The story takes a while to kick in and, when it does, it goes in a

rather predictable direction which I figured out pretty early on. The characters are likable and the writing is solid, but the story never truly grabs hold. My least favorite book in the series. I liked it but didn't love it. 2.5 stars bumped to 3 because of the writing and familiarity with the characters.

Diane Bowden says

Reading a John Madden again feels like visiting an old, dear friend. We are comfortable with one another and allow lots of leeway and little criticism. This Madden mystery was not very mysterious although it was interesting to watch it develop. I'm afraid I figured it out very early and watched for Madden to pick up on it. Lovely to see Lucy and Helen again. Please don't stop writing, Mr. Airth!
