ForeWord Reviews

MYSTERY

The Vows of Silence: A Simon Serrailler Mystery
Susan Hill
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There is a serial killer on the loose in the English country township of Lafferton and it has everyone, including Chief Inspector Simon Serrailler, flinching at every car that backfires. What makes this case especially baffling is that the killer seems to follow no pattern—the weapon is a rifle in one case, a handgun in another. The only linkage among the growing number of murders is a frightening one. The victims are all women.

This is the premise for Susan Hill's fourth entry in the police procedural series about C.I. Simon Serrailler. What separates Ms. Hill's work from the groaning shelf of mystery and procedural novels is her ability to tell a story without having the reader thumb back a few pages to feel caught up. Her style is straightforward and smoothes out the ridges of her complex plotlines. And there are enough twists and turns in *The Vows of Silence* to make the reader reach for a literary Dramamine.

As if it's not enough to have everyone breathing down his neck over the unsolved murders, Simon Serrailler has enough personal problems to give the most optimistic among us a splitting headache. His sister Cat has returned from Australia with her husband, who is dying from an insidious brain tumor. Serrailler, very fond of his brother-in-law, broods about the inevitable. His mother has passed away some time ago and now his father has taken up with a woman he doesn't approve of, and, oh yes, Simon is also estranged from his own love interest, the Reverend Jane Fitzroy, who has moved from Lafferton to put space between them. There's an old cliché in the writing business that says you can never give your hero enough problems, an idea to which Ms. Hill obviously subscribes.

Susan Hill's portrayal of English country life seems spot on. Her narrative voice, pacing, and, especially, her ability to create believable characters, makes reading a pleasure. Finally, *The Vows of Silence* passes this reviewer's litmus test for any author who writes a series: it's time to go back and read the first three Serrailler books. After that, I'll join the burgeoning Hill fan club that awaits the fifth Simon Serrailler novel.