



## Cause of Death

by Patricia Cornwell; Little, Brown (Penguin) 1996; 342 pp; \$22.95 softcover.

*Cause of Death* is Cornwell's seventh crime novel featuring Dr Kay Scarpetta, the seriously overworked Chief Medical Examiner of Virginia. It is just as good as its predecessors.

This time the action involves religious extremism and nuclear power. All the old favourites are present: Marino, Benton and Lucy. The pace is high octane as Cornwell creates a compelling (if slightly unbelievable) story that can be gulped down in one session.

One of the things that particularly appeals to me about Cornwell's work is the fact that she never allows violent death to seem commonplace. There is an important level of humanity and compassion in her books despite the grisly genre.

Cornwell's fans will be pleased to hear that she is executive producer and screenwriter for the forthcoming film of her last book *From Potter's Field*. More importantly, it is rumoured that the fabulous Susan Sarandon will play Dr Scarpetta. ● FW

## Whit

by Iain Banks; Abacus 1995; 445 pp; \$16.95

In his science fiction novels, Iain Banks often uses the device of the Culture to reflect on the intricate contours of the societies he conjures up from his imagination. The Culture is an infinitely powerful and technologically advanced society from which economics, inequality and hypocritical morality regarding sex and drugs have been banished. The classical 'Banksian' science fiction hero is the innocent yet wise Culture agent who is sent into inferior, corrupt societies to manipulate events to the benefit of the higher purposes of the Culture.

Whilst *Whit* is not one of Banks' science fiction novels, one cannot help but see in its chief protagonist many of

the hallmarks of the culture agent. Isis Whit is the Elect of God of the small Luskentyrian religious sect founded by her grandfather in the lowlands of Scotland. The Luskentyrian community, if we are to believe Isis' account is, like the Culture, a utopian society from which the trappings of late 20th century western society, both moral and technological, have been removed.

Isis, like the archetypal Culture agent, is sent out into the corrupt and inferior society on a mission to seek out her cousin Morag, who has renounced her faith, with the purpose of persuading her to return to the Luskentyrian community in time for the four-yearly festival of love (a free-love fest) at which she is to be the guest of honour.

Isis' experiences with telephones, British Rail, drug consumption, pornography, neo-nazis, raves, the police and every-day legal tender range from the slap-stick to the satirical. However, her sanctimonious pronouncements on the flaws of the society she has found herself in, whilst often well-directed, are delivered not by the all-wise, disinterested innocent but by the blinkered religious devotee. Indeed, Isis is rigid to the point of fanaticism in her application of Luskentyrian doctrine to those she meets, and she is not afraid to pour scorn upon those who fail to measure up.

Indeed it is here that any similarities between Isis and the Culture agent end. The Luskentyrian sect is not an advanced alien civilisation but a tin pot human community beset by the same hypocrisy and corruption as any other human society, a fact Isis discovers to her detriment in the second half of the novel. Isis responds to this challenge by questioning her own divinity and rediscovering her essential humanity. Armed with this new self knowledge and the moral flexibility that it brings, she manipulates events not for the benefit of the Luskentyrian sect as a whole, but rather, for the purposes of her own advancement. Is Isis a better person by the end of the novel? It is hard to say. Whilst we may not altogether mourn the passing of the old innocent Isis, the new cynical Isis is not entirely endearing either.

One cannot help but be disturbed by the apparent moral ambiguity that pervades the novel. The incestuous lechery of Isis' grandfather goes unpunished and Morag's duplicity is rewarded. But is this the moral ambiguity of Banks or Isis Whit? After all, *Whit* is ultimately the tale of a period of schism in Luskentyrianism as told by the ideological victor. One could conclude that the novel itself constitutes a monument erected by Isis to herself, as perhaps evidenced in the title of the novel. In the end, just as the faithful must accept Luskentyrian doctrine, so must the reader simply accept Isis' account on faith.

As usual, Banks applies an anthropologist's eye for detail to his creations. In Luskentyrianism he has created a religion complete with its own theology, doctrines and heresies. Everything from the obesity of the founder, to the ointment applied to the founder's wounds after he was washed up on the beaches of the Western Isles, forms the basis of the complex theology of Luskentyrianism. Indeed, having read of the mundane origins of much of Luskentyrian doctrine, one cannot help but speculate whether the doctrines of the world's major religions came from similarly banal origins.

Ultimately, *Whit* is an entertaining and intellectually stimulating read. Banks provides the reader with a multi-dimensional tale that reveals a wealth of hidden depths and insights, not only into the character of Isis Whit, but also into the nature of faith itself. ● JD

***BITS* was compiled by John Davies and Frith Way.**