

crime

The isle of dark souls

The Black House
by Peter May

Quercus, £12.99 * £11.69; 385pp

Black Heart
by Mike Nicol

Old Street, £12.99 * £11.69; 367pp

Crime
by Ferdinand von Schirach,
trans Carol Brown Janeway

Chatto & Windus, £12.99 * £11.69; 184pp

Marcel Berlins

The Outer Hebrides tourist board is unlikely to be too pleased with Peter May's portrait of the Isle of Lewis in *The Black House*. The bleakness of the island is matched by the darkness of the souls of its inhabitants, most of whom, it appears, dream of leaving it.

I do not know how accurate this is, but it's a chilling setting for a gripping novel, the first of a promised trilogy. Its hero is Fin MacLeod, a Lewis-born detective in Edinburgh whose young son has died in an accident and whose wife is about to leave him in the aftermath of their grief. MacLeod was part of a police team looking into a savage killing, as yet unsolved. When a murder on the Isle of Lewis shows many similarities, he is sent to his former homeland to help to investigate the possible connection. He knew the deceased, and his return revives disturbing memories and forces him back into the milieu that he was so glad to leave. Impressive writing and a clammy, claustrophobic atmosphere.

In *Black Heart*, the last book in Mike Nicol's compelling "Revenge Trilogy", set in Cape Town, the security firm owned by the former gun-runners Mace Bishop and



after a gun battle that leaves Buso wounded; the husband disappears soon afterwards. An apparently respectable client turns out to have an exceptionally unpleasant past. Bishop's wife has been murdered, his daughter is out of control, and he's broke. Responsible for many of the firm's troubles is the evil manipulator Sheemina February, a kind of sexed-up female Professor Moriarty. The plot teems with corruption, double-crossing, shootings and incessant action. Many die. The characters cover every possible racial group and combination, there is terrific dialogue, and Nicol's Cape Town is cool, dangerous, full of humour and very far from its touristy image.

Like its predecessors in the trilogy, *Black Heart* paints a vivid portrait of the moral confusion of post-apartheid society. If Deon Meyer is still the king of South

of quiet short stories vaguely linked by the theme of guilt. Its author, Ferdinand von Schirach, is a well-known German defence attorney and the tales, though fictional, raise real philosophical and moral issues common to most criminal justice systems. When does a crime deserve punishment? In what circumstances can moral justification negate legal guilt? When does responsibility for crime begin and end? The stories — presumably inspired by the author's own experiences — are subtle, gently written and thought provoking. They deal not with grand crimes that make the headlines, but with those committed by ordinary people who find themselves reacting to extraordinary events or impulses. Von Schirach doesn't force his answers on the reader. He kindly asks that we think about the dilemmas he has posed.

LEE FROST / GETTY

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