Charles Todd’s critically acclaimed novels featuring Scotland Yard Inspector Ian Rutledge have been hailed by The Washington Post Book World as “one of the best historical series being written today.” The New York Times Book Review calls Todd’s mysteries “meticulously wrought...harrowing psychological drama.” Now he stakes out new territory in this mesmerizing stand-alone novel of one woman’s dark journey through family obsession, wartime secrets, and a chilling legacy.…

The Murder Stone

The Great War is still raging in the autumn of 1916, when Francesca Hatton’s beloved grandfather dies on the family estate in England’s isolated Exe Valley. Grieving for the man who raised her, Francesca is stunned to find an unsigned letter among his effects, cursing the Hattons and their descendants. Now a stranger has shown up on her doorstep, accusing her grandfather of being a murderer.

Ex-soldier Richard Leighton blames Francis Hatton for the death of his mother, who vanished nearly a quarter of a century earlier. Her body was never found, only a shawl stained with her blood. And Leighton is not the only one with a claim on Francesca’s grandfather. On the day of his funeral, unexpected visitors arrive with the mourners, and Francesca is besieged by charges of Hatton’s vicious dealings. Yet there is also a shy young woman who praises his secret generosity.
At the center of the intrigue is an unusual white stone that lies hidden in a secluded garden where Francesca once played with her five male cousins, all of them dead now on the battlefields of France. According to the terms of Hatton’s will, the Murder Stone must be dug up and transported to Scotland, where it is to be buried forever. But before Francesca can begin the journey, a series of ominous “accidents” occur, culminating in the discovery of a bleeding body on the Murder Stone itself.

Was Hatton the loving, caring protector his granddaughter always believed him to be? Or a vindictive, secretive man who cultivated dangerous enemies? Francesca sets out in pursuit of the truth—and into the sights of someone determined to exact a revenge long overdue.

From the Hardcover edition.

Amazon.com Review

How well do we really know the people we love? Maybe never well enough, to judge by the example of Francesca Hatton, the young British heiress around whom Charles Todd constructs his first standalone historical suspense tale, The Murder Stone. Leaving London and her volunteer work with wounded World War I soldiers, Francesca—"the last of the Hattons ... [a] long and distinguished line"—returns in 1916 to River’s End, the rural estate where her powerful and beloved grandfather is dying of a stroke. Francis Hatton’s passing hits Francesca hard, especially coming so soon after the demise of her five male cousins, all of them “mown down with their dreams of glory” in battle. But her mourning is interrupted by multiple mysteries. Why did Francis insist in his will that the Murder Stone, a large and cryptically named white rock in his garden, be moved to the farthest corner of Scotland? Why had he concealed his ownership of two other, distant estates? And could there be any truth in the charge, leveled by an invalided soldier, that Francis long ago “abducted and killed his mother, then buried the body where it couldn’t be found”? Forced by new revelations to rebalance her faith in the man who’d taken her in as an orphaned child, while simultaneously contending with a random sniper who’s invaded the neighborhood of River’s End, Francesca struggles to build a new future, even as her trust in the “facts” of her past crumbles.

Over the course of six previous novels, beginning with A Test of Wills—all featuring shell-shocked soldier-turned-inspector Ian Rutledge—Todd (the nom de plume of a mother-son writing team) has shown considerable skill in formulating criminal conundrums against the backdrop of post-World War I Britain. The Murder Stone vividly recaptures the nation in the very midst of that international violence, a painful period of untimely deaths and stunning Zeppelin raids. However, this yarn is as much a Gothic romance as an abstruse puzzler. Most of the secrets here can be figured out faster by the average reader than by the incredibly naïve Francesca. And with the exception of that vexed protagonist, whose investigations paint her into ever tighter moral corners, none of this novel’s characters achieve much dimension. They’re mechanical players in a drama that is surprising mostly for its failure to surprise. --J. Kingston Pierce

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