

BLOG TOUR – MARCH 14th

DEADLY GAME by Matt Johnson

Published by Orenda Books

I would like to start my contribution to the ‘*Deadly Game*’ blog tour by thanking Karen Sullivan at Orenda Books for giving me the chance to take part. After months of anticipation, the book was certainly worth the wait.

Plot

Recovering from the aftermath of an assassination attempt, Inspector Robert Finlay and his family are now staying in an MI5 safe house in West London, where they are trying to return to a normal life. However, Finlay soon discovers that ‘normal’ is no longer an option for him.

Seen by his former police colleagues at Stoke Newington as a bullet magnet – and with word spreading about his past involvement with the SAS – Finlay’s position there has become untenable. At a loss as to what to do with him, his superiors finally assign him to a new people-trafficking squad, investigating the Eastern European sex-slave industry.

Partnered with Nina Brasov, their first job is to interview Relia Stanga, a young Romanian slave-girl recently rescued from captivity. Relia is willing to testify against the traffickers, but she is murdered before Finlay and Nina get a chance to talk to her.

While a cat and mouse hunt for Relia’s killers gathers momentum, the gang raise the stakes by kidnapping SO19 firearms specialist, Lynn Wainwright. Finlay is then faced with a race against time to rescue his colleague before she too is lost to heroine addiction and slavery.

When his MI5 protection officer discovers a covert secret service operation that puts all their lives in danger, Finlay once again finds himself embroiled in a deadly game of secrets, as he tries to save his colleague and protect his family.

My Review

Having waited a whole year for the sequel to Matt Johnson’s debut novel, ‘*Wicked Game*’, when my copy of ‘*Deadly Game*’ finally arrived, I could not wait to start reading it. I was not disappointed. It is a well-constructed, thought-provoking and gripping experience, dealing as it does with one of the most cruel and horrific forms of criminal exploitation.

In this second novel of the trilogy, the focus for Finlay shifts from physical effects to psychological ones, as past events begin to take their toll. Now that the dust has settled the Finlays are trying to put the past behind them and move forward. However, things are rarely that simple.

Having demonstrated her fierce determination and ability to deal with even life-threatening adversity, Finlay's wife Jenny has her resilience put even further to the test when he begins to show signs of PTSD. Growing increasingly distant, his reluctance to talk to her is worrying enough, but when his nightly struggle with nightmares and flashbacks result in him accidentally striking her in his sleep, she is reluctantly forced to vacate the marital bed and sleep in the spare room for her own protection.

This kind of separation is not healthy for any marriage, but it is even harder when you do not understand what is happening or what to do to make it better. Therefore, when Finlay's involvement with a ruthless gang of traffickers – together with the machinations of MI5 – threaten all their lives yet again, it is not surprising Jenny starts to fear for their relationship. Even the most loyal and supportive of wives have their limitations, and Jenny is scared she is reaching hers.

Having seen more than his fair share of atrocities, it is the emotional vulnerability that sets Matt Johnson's seasoned police officer apart from many other crime novel heroes. There is nothing false about him. Every dangerous situation he finds himself in occurs through necessity rather than bravado. He just does what has to be done and silently deals with the consequences, despite his inner trauma.

Drawing on his own experience of PTSD, Matt Johnson has created a character we can believe in. It is testimony to the writing that Finlay's battle with his own personal demons – while still managing to function effectively in pursuit of a ruthless gang of criminals – is entirely plausible. He is an ordinary guy, confronting extraordinary odds.

All the main characters in the novel are fully developed, brought to life through a combination of natural dialogue and the way they initiate or react to a series of often testing and dangerous situations. As a result, the novel exudes authenticity.

The story itself is both exciting and harrowing in equal measures. The subject matter of the novel does not make for easy reading, especially given the level of ruthless inhumanity involved in this vile exploitation of vulnerable young women. However, increasing the awareness of this type of criminality will, hopefully, prove to be one of the prime achievements of the book.

Apart from the central theme, several subplots are cleverly interwoven into the main storyline, seamlessly knitting together as the drama unfolds. With tension mounting, the reader is immersed in the thrill of the chase, drawn from chapter to chapter until all the secrets, deceptions and conspiracies are finally revealed. Add to this an emotive portrayal of the suffering of helpless victims, and the result is a gripping and emotional rollercoaster of a novel.

In his recent newsletter, Matt Johnson talked about the second book in any trilogy suffering from 'Middle Child Syndrome'. Being neither the exciting opening introduction nor the satisfying conclusion to the story, it risks being caught in the middle between Book One and Book Three, serving merely as a bridge. However, as far as '*Deadly Game*' is concerned, he need not have worried.

Although continuing from where the first novel left off, from start to finish *'Deadly Game'* stands alone as a page-turning thriller in its own right. It is cleverly and sensitively written by an author who, not only knows his subject, but also demonstrates a real understanding of how it feels to be Finlay. I cannot wait to read Book Three.

The Author

Matt Johnson served as a soldier and Metropolitan Police officer for twenty-five years. Blown off his feet at the London Baltic Exchange bombing in 1992, and one of the first police officers on the scene of the Regent's Park bombing, Matt was also at the Libyan People's Bureau in 1984 where he escorted his mortally wounded friend and colleague, Yvonne Fletcher, to hospital. Hidden wounds took their toll. In 1999, Matt was discharged from the police with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. While undergoing treatment, he was encouraged by his counsellor to write about his career and his experience of murders, shootings and terrorism. One evening, Matt sat at his computer and started to weave these notes into a work of fiction that he described as having a tremendously cathartic effect on his own condition. His bestselling thriller, *'Wicked Game'*, which was longlisted for the CWA John Creasey Dagger, was the result. *'Deadly Game'* is the second novel in the trilogy.

'Deadly Game' is published by Orenda Books and is available to download as an eBook now and in paperback format from March 15th. It can be purchased from Amazon, Waterstones, W H Smith and other leading bookshops.