

## Richard Osman's bland Britain

*How did the TV presenter's terminally twee stories of death and Waitrose become the bestselling novels in the UK?*

By Anna Leszkiewicz  
The New Statesman  
12 September 2023



In Richard Osman's debut novel, four busybody pensioners investigate the murder of a man who was recently bludgeoned over the head with an old-fashioned spanner, and who had – prior to said bludgeoning – owned a stake in the luxury retirement village where they live. Coopers Chase, a shiny modern development surrounded by the sleepy countryside of south-east England, is a middle-class utopia that houses 300 residents over the age of 65 and boasts a swimming pool and “contemporary upscale restaurant”. Each week, “Waitrose delivery vans clink with wine and repeat prescriptions” as they pass over the cattle grid. It has been a lucrative investment for our bludgeoning victim: his

stake, residents have learned, was worth £12.25m. Hearing this number, one character “gives a low whistle”. “Whatever money he had made before, Coopers Chase had been in another league entirely,” Osman writes. “A waterfall of money.” The sequels concern a box containing £100,000 of heroin, a £10m VAT scam and £20m worth of stolen diamonds: these, the novels tell us, are sums well worth killing for.

It is all chump change, though, when compared with the real value of The Thursday Murder Club series, which has sold over four-and-a-half million copies and earned Osman’s publisher, Viking, more than £35m. The first novel in the series, *The Thursday Murder Club*, was the bestselling title of 2020, and is the only book to have sold a million copies in the year of its release. The follow-up, *The Man Who Died Twice* (2021), is one of the fastest-selling novels since records began, and in 2022 the third instalment, *The Bullet That Missed* became the fastest-selling adult fiction hardback from a British author since records began – though the latest instalment, *The Last Devil to Die*, could surpass it. The film rights to the series have been bought by Steven Spielberg, with, Osman reassures us, a very famous cast to be announced – so *The Thursday Murder Club*’s multimillion-dollar film franchise, presumably starring anyone still receiving residual cheques from *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, should be coming soon to a theatre near you.

Before he was “The Multimillion-Copy Bestseller Richard Osman”, as his book jackets describe him, Osman was known as the 6ft 7in co-host of the teatime trivia show *Pointless*, where he delivered mildly eyebrow-raising comments about even the driest of facts, and graciously sat down behind a desk. Born in Essex, raised in Sussex, 52-year-old Osman was also a television producer, and invented the show’s formula. He has now retired from *Pointless* to focus on his novels (except *Pointless Celebrities* – there are celebrities on that one).

Osman has said he has been “warmly welcomed” by a cohort of crime writers, and indeed he has. The first book comes with an enthusiastic cover quote from Ian Rankin (coincidentally, on page 108, a character admires Rankin’s Rebus series); the second bears one from Jeffery Deaver (coincidentally, on page 107, a character calls Deaver “terrific”); the third carries praise from Lee Child (who – coincidentally, I’m sure – is quoted approvingly on page 136). The mere fact of Osman’s name recognition must account for some of the books’ popularity (his

debut sold 45,000 copies in its first three days on sale – unheard of for an unheard-of author) but cannot explain it all. They are the most popular novels in Britain today, which might – by one metric, at least – qualify Osman as our incumbent national novelist.

In Richard Osman's twee and pleasant land, farm shops and Waitroses are nestled between dappled hedgerows and golf courses. Bees buzz in manicured gardens; through kitchen windows, foxes make meaningful eye contact with the lonely. It is a world without poverty, politics or pandemics. (Though all four books seem to be set in a six-month period somewhere between 2020 and 2023, there are only two passing, jokey mentions of Covid.) The most savage social divide is the falling out between the Chat and Crochet club and Knit and Natter society.

If Richard Curtis defined his Britain as “the country of Shakespeare, Churchill, the Beatles, Sean Connery, Harry Potter and David Beckham's right foot”, then Osman's is the country of *Morse*, Marks & Spencer, *Escape to the Country*, Holland & Barrett, Carpetright, talkSPORT, *Celebrity Antiques Road Trip*, Pizza Express, *Rogue Traders*, Robert Dyas and gins in tins. (This is the brand-name school of scene-setting.) Violence is localised and interpersonal – motivated by individual greed or petty revenge. Murderers buy their knives from John Lewis and fist fights break out over the *Call the Midwife* Christmas special. It is a portrait that is neither utopian nor satirical, but hangs limply in-between, existing to provoke a mild chuckle of recognition from middle-class readers.

Osman's murder mysteries belong to a class of fiction known as “cosy crime” – a category that includes Agatha Christie, GK Chesterton, MC Beaton and, doubtless informed by Osman's success, the Reverend Richard Coles' *Murder Before Evensong*. It's a genre Osman performs with unembarrassed literal-mindedness. Here is a cosy location – a luxury retirement village in a rural idyll. But what's that, coming over the hill? Surely not – crimes! Each week, his four main characters meet to investigate unsolved murders over Victoria sponge, as fresh bodies pile up around them. They are: Elizabeth, a single-minded ex-MI6 agent; Joyce, a chatty, no-nonsense pensioner; “Red” Ron, a tattooed former union leader; and Ibrahim, a gentle, polite retired psychiatrist. They work with two local police officers, Chris and Donna, but are otherwise routinely underestimated by the criminals, secret agents and mafia bosses they meet. It's a premise and tone borrowed most obviously from Agatha Christie's Miss Marple

series (the character belonged to her own Tuesday murder club) but also familiar from all manner of rousing British village epics, from *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* to *Calendar Girls*.

The new book begins as an octogenarian antiques dealer, who briefly helped with the club's last case, is shot dead just after Christmas. Like its predecessors, *The Last Devil to Die* is around 400 pages, broken into roughly 100 very short, dialogue-heavy chapters, each one ending on a punchline, revelation or cliffhanger. Osman alternates between the close third-person and diary entries by Joyce – an odd decision, as the two forms are almost indistinguishable in style, tone and humour: self-consciously British and intentionally bathetic, juxtaposing the banal, the quaint and the domestic with the implausible, or the gritty.

Which is to say that Osman has one joke, repeated hundreds of times. Imagine: a little old woman, out to lunch with a drugs baron! A granny with a gun in her bag! At the beginning of *The Last Devil to Die*, Joyce writes in her diary: "I'm beginning to forget what I did before all the murders started happening. I remember I was going to learn to play bridge, but that's gone on the backburner. I've also got more episodes of *Morse* backed up on my Sky Plus than I know what to do with." Later, a drug dealer tells Elizabeth, "I run a legitimate logistics company." She replies: "And I'm a harmless pensioner." At one point, Ron announces: "Half an hour ago I had my feet up, watching the curling, and now look at me. Warehouse, corpse, the lot." Not long after: "'Dominic Holt is dead,' says Ron. Ibrahim gives a low whistle." (Another one.) "'And on a Saturday!' says Joyce, with wonder."

This is the fourth book, quite some time after we first encountered Elizabeth, asking about knife wounds over shepherd's pie and drugging her husband, wondering, "Temazepam before milk, or milk before temazepam?" By this point, the reader feels as if they have been bludgeoned over the head with an old-fashioned spanner. The more we are expected to laugh, the more the novel's warnings not to underestimate the elderly are themselves undermined: if crime lords are idiots to assume Elizabeth and her friends are doddery old fools, why should their not being as senile as expected still be funny to readers, over a thousand pages later?

The foursome can escape a confrontation with an armed murderer using nothing but a kindly smile and a poisoned slice of Battenberg. The threats, the victims, even the crimes themselves, never really matter. If the villains enjoy tea and cake too, their sins may be forgiven; the group employs a brand of vigilante justice that respects no laws or conventional morality. They adopt a Polish builder, Bogdan, though they suspect he's a killer himself; become firm friends with charismatic drug dealer Connie after entrapping and imprisoning her; and bring cheery former KGB colonel Viktor along with them after deciding not to kill him.

A working-class teenage boy who kicks Ibrahim in the head, however, is deemed beyond redemption, so they plant drugs in his home. People are sorted into goodies and baddies by a simple logic: bad people park in disabled parking spaces even though they are not disabled. Good people do not.

Osman is, by all reports, an extremely charming, nice man (in each book's acknowledgements he thanks every person involved in their production). His characters are too, and as no drug dealer, spy or mafia boss is immune to their appeal, they are never truly in peril. In fact, the real threat to them is not violence, arrest or even death – it's dementia. It lurks in the shadows, a vision of the future haunting every character over 65, the one adversary that cannot be talked around. But even dementia, here, is gentle and subdued – comic, sad, but never vulgar or aggressive or undignified, and it is tidied away before it can get too ugly, or too painful.

With Osman's background in puzzles and games, and the detail that the club is held in the retirement village's Jigsaw Room, one might expect – in the absence of high-stakes thrills or grisly violence – locked-room mysteries, unexplainable disappearances. But while Osman's plots are busy, they are not intricate enigmas. If his TV background has informed his novel-writing at all, it is in the supremacy of the formula: find something that works, and give it to your audience again and again.

In one of the series' s funnier, more self-aware flourishes, Osman creates a chief constable named Andrew Everton, who writes crime books on the side: *Remain Silent*, *Given in Evidence*, *Harm Your Defence*. These contain phrases such as: "the corpse was mutilated beyond all recognition" and "limbs were splayed at grotesque angles, like a swastika of death". (The implication being that hard-

boiled clichés, I suppose, are worse than soft-boiled ones.) Joyce gives one a go. “I only picked it up because there’s a Hilary Mantel looming on my bedside table, and I didn’t feel up to it yet.” Low effort, low stakes, low reward – for those times when you don’t feel up to Hilary Mantel, there’s always Richard Osman.

*The Last Devil to Die*

*Richard Osman*

*Viking, 448pp, £22*