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The Sixth Commandment is a delicate dissection of human frailty

This unusually sensitive true crime drama features masterful performances from Timothy Spall, Anne Reid and Éanna Hardwicke.

By Rachel Cooke

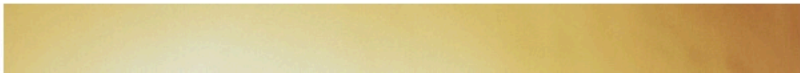


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Rachel Cooke is a writer at the *Observer*. In the 2006 British Press Awards, she was named Interviewer of the Year.

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“No sound is dissonant which tells of life,” goes the last line of Coleridge’s great poem “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison”, and in *The Sixth Commandment*, Sarah Phelps never allows us to forget it. Of course we know already that love makes a fool of us all. But while Peter Farquhar and Ann Moore-Martin probably should have known better than to let a young man called Benjamin Field into their lives – if a person 40 years your junior makes a proclamation of adoration, it’s wise to be suspicious – Phelps’s script, helped along by the immense talents of the actors who perform it, contains no inharmoniousness that I can hear. This is a series about death, and yet every moment speaks of life, and of how people long to live it to the full: a repletion that involves love, on which some of us will not ever give up.

But I’m running ahead of myself here. *The Sixth Commandment* is based on real events. Field inveigled his way into Farquhar’s life, convincing this celibate Christian – a Coleridge-loving former master at Stowe School – that he had at last found a partner. First, he drugged the older man. In 2015 he killed him. Soon after this, Field turned his attention to Farquhar’s Buckinghamshire neighbour, Moore-Martin, a spinster and devout Catholic. He told her he was in love with her, got her to change her will in his favour, and began drugging her, too. She was rescued by her niece in the nick of time, but died soon after, of natural causes. In 2019, Field, then 28, was convicted of Farquhar’s murder, and sentenced to life in prison. According to psychiatrists, he has a narcissistic personality disorder.

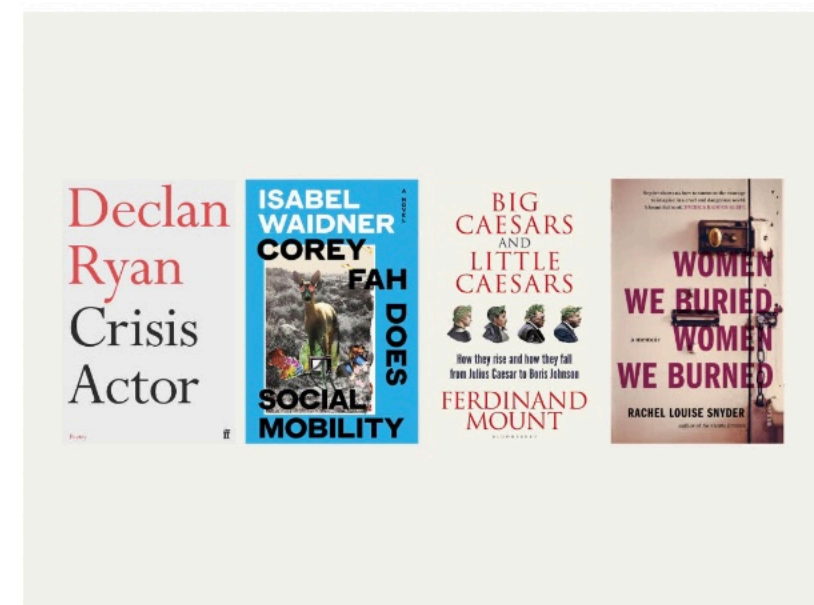
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I came to this series with my all usual resistance to true crime; there will be people who knew Farquhar and Moore-Martin who’ll find *The Sixth Commandment* painful and exploitative. But I was soon in its thrall. This one is different, I think. First, there is the extreme care taken by Phelps. It is all so delicately done; what baffled me when I read about these events in the newspapers now makes perfect psychological sense, even if the details are no less horrifying. Second, there are the performances, which are so good – so absolutely right and true – it feels as if a kind of debt is being paid, full attention given to lives that might otherwise be just fodder for voyeuristic unease. Timothy Spall is astonishing as Farquhar, and Anne Reid quite marvellous as Moore-Martin, and thanks to this we grasp what made them vulnerable to Field. Age made them invisible, but in the glare of his fixated gaze, they’re seen again. Loneliness, followed by gratitude, left them defenceless.



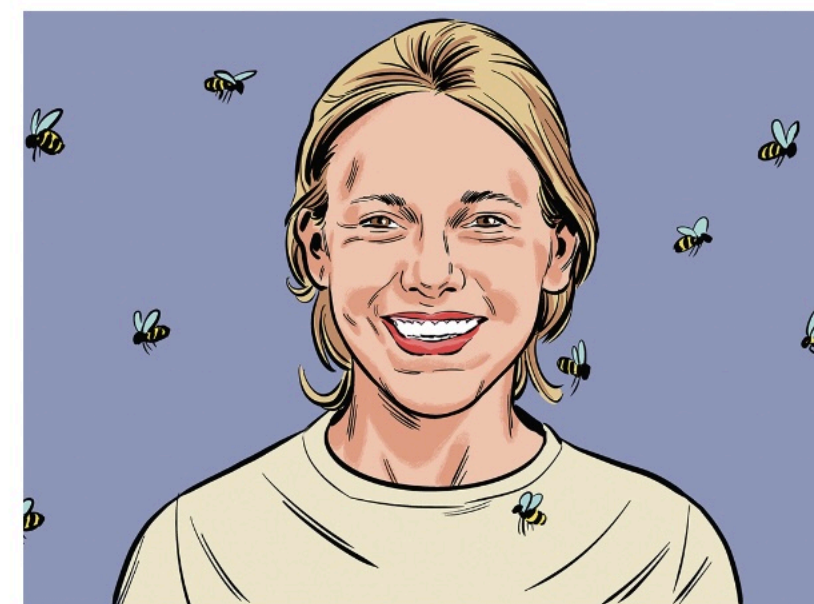
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But there's more. Into Spall and Reid's respective masterclasses slips a rising star, the Irish actor Éanna Hardwicke, who plays Field, and what he does is amazing. Here is all of Field's (we assume) plausibility, and all of his creepiness; he is as unobtrusive as a side table or a vase of flowers, and yet you cannot take your eyes off him. The stillness, the strangeness, the single-mindedness: to bystanders, these things are obvious and unnerving, but to his victims, they're attractive qualities, inducing feelings that hover between the parental and the sexual: a desire that finds its outlet in hugs and kisses, with old-fashioned nightwear a bulwark against anything more obviously disturbing. And somehow, Hardwicke makes all this clear. Truly, I can't find enough good things to say about his performance.

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The first episode is Spall's, and the second Reid's; I imagine that three and four will be Hardwicke's, and I look forward to seeing what he does with them. But as unspeakable as Fielding's behaviour was – he claimed later that he was cruel to Farquhar for the hell of it – the real horror of this series lies in the universal rather than the particular. It speaks to our collective isolation, the condition now so widespread, and to the risk involved in daring to break free of it.

In Farquhar and Moore-Martin, we see a version of our future selves, our small vanities intact even as the sand runs through the hourglass. Who among us is resistant to flattery? The human heart does not exist that doesn't flip over at the sound of a lover declaring he'll be at your side forever more.