

Timothy Spall and Anne Reid star in compassionate true crime drama *The Sixth Commandment* on BBC1

The factual series paints a horrible story of gaslighting, abuse and murder in a Buckinghamshire village

By Dan Einav

All the lonely people, where do they all come from? The Beatles may have meant it as a rhetorical question but *Maids Moreton* — where new BBC factual drama *The Sixth Commandment* is set — serves as an answer. A Buckinghamshire village full of verdant gardens and silver-haired residents, it's the kind of place where Eleanor Rigby might well have lived, and where a real tragedy involving two lonely retirees named Peter Farquhar and Ann Moore-Martin unfolded.

The two led parallel, solitary lives a few doors apart. Both were respected educators and devoted churchgoers. Neither had ever found love. That is until both fell for the same significantly younger man: a twenty-something church warden called Benjamin Field who seduced, gaslit and murdered Farquhar in 2015 before moving on to manipulating Moore-Martin in similar fashion.

The unsettling story has now been adapted for the screen as a four-part series. But *The Sixth Commandment* stands out from the ever-expanding line up of true crime offerings. Rather than fuelling our macabre curiosity about the depths of human cruelty, the show delicately elicits compassion for two people who mistook cynical exploitation for sincere affection. The series is less preoccupied with Field's motivations and more invested in his victims.

Neither is depicted here as being hopelessly naive or easily enamoured. Peter (Timothy Spall) is shown early on talking about the impossibility of love and the burden of his own homosexuality. But while guest lecturing at a local university he finds himself getting close to bright student Ben (Éanna Hardwicke) who shares his passion for verse and scripture. They exchange poems and, not long after, marriage vows.

To watch the older man soften, to see his insecurities recede in the company of his lover, is beautiful and then devastating. Within months Ben moves from faux-care to outright abuse, poisoning Peter's body with drugs and infecting his (and his family's) mind with lies. When Peter dies, alcoholism is blamed and only later questioned.

The second episode charts a similar process of calculated wooing and control with Ann (Anne Reid), who revels in her renewed purpose and reawakened feelings only to die in shame at having found a saviour in a veritable devil.

Veterans Spall and Reid play their parts with dignity and vulnerability while relative unknown Hardwicke rises to the challenge. He simultaneously portrays what Peter and Ann saw in Benjamin Field as well as the sociopath underneath. His darker side creeps increasingly to the fore in the more procedural second half of the series in which the families' suspicions about the deaths — both of which happened after the victims redrafted their wills — lead to a police investigation and trial. Watching the court proceedings, Ann's niece (Annabel Scholey) laments how her aunt is "pulled apart like her life was nothing". The same thankfully cannot be said about this thoughtful, moving show.

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Episodes 1-2 on BBC1 on July 17-18 at 9pm and on iPlayer thereafter