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## Murder in the shires

by Lucy Lethbridge (/author/249/lucy-lethbridge)



Timothy Spall as Peter Farquhar (right), with Éanna Hardwicke as Ben Field

Sarah Phelps is known best for her adaptations of Agatha Christie novels, turning them into interestingly bleak, sometimes verging on lurid, psychodramas. Her versions tend to be interested more in the nature and context of evil than the characterful sleuth and puzzle-solving formula that is traditional in the originals. In her 2016 BBC version of Christie's play *The Witness for the Prosecution*, for example, she transformed Christie's hero, a brilliant veteran barrister who flashes his courtroom skills to get a young man off the hook for murder, into a downtrodden, shell-shocked, emasculated solicitor motivated by a doomed romantic love for the young man's mysterious wife. It was a compelling piece of television: Phelps kept the clever twists and turns of Christie's plot but was more interested in prising out deep motivations in her characters, setting it not in the 1950s but in the 1920s, in a war-damaged world where an emotionally stunted, cynical generation is emptied of hope and belief.

There are echoes of that sensibility in Phelps' new series *The Sixth Commandment* (all episodes now streaming on BBC iPlayer). Here we have the familiar certainties of a certain kind of steady middle-English life rocked by an act of incomprehensible malevolence – as in a Christie novel the order of the village or the country house is torn apart by a moment of violence, then pieced back together by the rational process of working out the truth. But *The Sixth Commandment* is based on a horrifying true story and although justice is finally done, the routing of evil doesn't deliver the consolations that it does in a golden-age detective novel. In a fiction, the ends are neatly tied but in life they still dangle disturbingly.

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The sixth commandment refers to the biblical one about not killing but also hints at the broader context of this awful story. In 2015, Peter Farquhar, a 69-year-old former schoolmaster, was found dead at his home in a Buckinghamshire village. His death was not thought to be suspicious, although friends and relatives had been surprised by how rapidly his health had declined since his retirement only three years before. It wasn't until the death, two years later, of his neighbour, Ann Moore-Martin – in her eighties, also a retired teacher and also in physical good health – that questions began to be asked of a young man, an Anglican ordinand and church warden, who had been a lodger in both their houses when they died.

Ben Field had made himself invaluable. Always there with a cup of tea or an offer to help with heavy lifting, he came with a sidekick, a weak and inadequate fellow student called Martyn who also frequently lodged with elderly people and seemed to be in thrall to Field's grandiosity, his armour-clad conviction of intellectual superiority. Field persuaded both Peter Farquhar and Ann Moore-Martin that he was in love with them, despite a 50-year age gap, and he inveigled them into dependent, tormented relationships. He lied to them, drugged them with hallucinogenics so they thought they were going mad, taunted and tortured them, and made them change their wills in his favour. He told Farquhar's brother and sister-in-law that Peter was a serious alcoholic; Ann's niece thought she had dementia. Over four episodes, we watch him manipulate two good people into humiliating submission. He was eventually discovered, charged and sentenced in 2019 to life imprisonment for the murder of Peter Farquhar whom he drugged, forced whisky on and smothered with a cushion.

Both the victims were committed Christians: Farquhar an evangelical Anglican and lay reader and Moore-Martin a Catholic. Did this make them particularly susceptible to the blandishments of Field, himself the son of a Baptist minister? Certainly he was able to manipulate them with a winning performance of churchiness, a large-cross-wearing, Bible-quoting display of apparent religious ardour carefully tailored to appeal to their respective spiritual interests. They were kind, trusting people: keen to help, open-minded and open to the young. Peter Farquhar was a scholarly man who taught classes on Romantic poetry at Buckingham University and had recently retired as the head of English at Stowe. He was fond of church-crawling, listened to Radio 3 and enjoyed growing roses. He was a homosexual, not closeted but never active, believing for religious reasons that it was a deviance. "I do not feel it is possible for me ever to be loved in that way," he tells his brother – though his spiritual director encourages him to be open to love (and later was to join Field and Farquhar in a commitment ceremony). Field, who had a cold perception of other people's desires, insinuated himself into a full but lonely life, into a tender inner world of passions unspent. He posed as an ardent young poet, a would-be priest, a chaste lover, the boon companion of secret dreams. To Ann Moore-Martin, he played a rugged young sexual champion sent from God: he inscribed words on her mirror suggesting that he was a reincarnation of Jesus; he sent her a

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photograph of himself with the words "I am always with you." Field had

all the emptiness of a psychopath and also all the terrifying charisma. "I am in love with you," he told them. They believed him.

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True-life murder stories too often become bogged down with an obsession with the killer rather than the victim. There is a prurient desire to winkle away at the mind of evil, the how and why of it. But the truth is that psychopaths are not interesting characters: there are no answers or arcs of development or possibilities of change; they are flat and two-dimensional, bound only to repetition like Milton's Satan, "which way I fly is hell; myself am hell". Sarah Phelps has talked of her determination not to let Ben Field become the dark star of this story: this was to be about the people he murdered, their lives, their feelings, their accomplishments. "One thing I didn't want to do was to glamorise the killer. A lot of TV programmes give you the sense that you're falling under the spell of the killer, who's incredibly intelligent, with some grand plan, but I wanted to understand and honour the victims, to give them life and dignity. They were more than just Ben Field's victims. That backstory was important for me. Peter and Ann led full, vibrant, intelligent, educated lives, full of curiosity, with families, friends, social lives, their love of poetry and theatre and their devout faiths."

She has succeeded. The Sixth Commandment is very disturbing (its emotional violence has haunted me since I saw it), but it is also full of compassion and admiration for the quiet lives that metropolitan television makers often consign to hackneyed images of tea-cosy respectability. Both Peter and Ann were modest, but their Christian ambitions were mighty. One is struck throughout how real and vivid and layered their lives were in comparison to Field's – and yet how terrifyingly close he was able to come in imitation of that reality, to mimic it with horrible accuracy. He is a simulacrum, like the AI version of a poem, almost but not quite the thing itself.

The acting is superb, the worlds created completely convincing. Timothy Spall and Anne Reid are brought low in humiliation as Peter and Ann but somehow their dignity is never compromised; in fact, it is enhanced. The end of the story we know, of course. Field was eventually trapped – mostly by his own arrogant assumption that he would win because, with his superior cleverness, he could never lose. But thank goodness, he didn't win; and as The Sixth Commandment demonstrates, it really was a victory for goodness.

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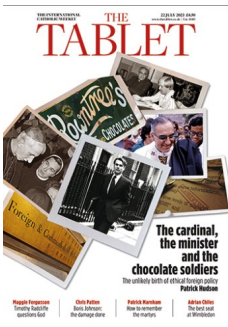
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