



The Murder Stone: A Novel of Suspense

Charles Todd

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The Great War is still raging in the autumn of 1916, when Francesca Hatton's beloved grandfather dies on the family estate in

England's isolated Exe Valley. Grieving for the man who raised her, Francesca is stunned to find an unsigned letter among his effects, cursing the Hattons and their descendants. Now a stranger has shown up on her doorstep, accusing her grandfather of being a murderer.

Ex-soldier Richard Leighton blames Francis Hatton for the death of his mother, who vanished nearly a quarter of a century earlier. Her body was never found, only a shawl stained with her blood. And Leighton is not the only one with a claim on Francesca's grandfather. On the day of his funeral, unexpected visitors arrive with the mourners, and Francesca is besieged by charges of Hatton's vicious dealings. Yet there is also a shy young woman who praises his secret generosity.

At the center of the intrigue is an unusual white stone that lies hidden in a secluded garden where Francesca once played with her five male cousins, all of them dead now on the battlefields of France. According to the terms of Hatton's will, the Murder Stone must be dug up and transported to Scotland, where it is to be buried forever. But before Francesca can begin the journey, a series of ominous "accidents" occur, culminating in the discovery of a bleeding body on the Murder Stone itself.

Was Hatton the loving, caring protector his granddaughter always believed him to be? Or a vindictive, secretive man who cultivated dangerous enemies? Francesca sets out in pursuit of the truth—and into the sights of someone determined to exact a revenge long overdue.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Murder Stone: A Novel of Suspense Details

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Author : Charles Todd

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From Reader Review The Murder Stone: A Novel of Suspense for online ebook

Kay says

Best Charles Todd ever!

I've read many books in their two mystery series, but this standalone novel of suspense by Charles Todd is a masterpiece. Full of twists and turns and family secrets. Very different from the mysteries...which I do enjoy. But do try this one also.

Suzan says

I picked up this book thinking it was next in one of my favorite series, the Ian Rutledge mysteries. I was surprised, but pleased, to find it a very well done stand alone, more a gothic than a mystery, set in Todd's era of expertise, WWI. As in the mysteries, the time and place, rural England during and immediately after the Great War, is beautifully evoked. Todd's command of the speech, manners and customs of the period is so pitch perfect, I could believe the book was written in 1923 rather than 2003.

Young Francesca Hatton returns to her grandfather's estate for his funeral. She is the last of her generation of Hattons, her five male cousins having been killed in the war. But instead of closure she finds only questions. Who wrote the letter cursing her family now and forever? Who are all the strangers attending the funeral, making demands and threats? Why did she never know of her grandfather's ownership of an orphanage? Why the strange codicil in his will requesting that she remove the large white stone in the garden and transport it to the northernmost part of Scotland?

For me, the least satisfying part of this well plotted and fast paced novel was the relationship between Francesca and Richard Leighton, the stranger who accuses Francesca's beloved, newly buried grandfather of having murdered Leighton's mother many years ago. He is angry, obsessed with the past, demanding that Francesca provide him with proof of her grandfather's supposed crime. To have him turn suddenly from antagonist to love interest is, of course, in the best tradition of gothic romance, but I found it difficult to believe here. Still the action, atmosphere and totally unexpected ending made this a thoroughly enjoyable read.

LJ says

THE MURDER STONE (Gothic Suspense)- Ex

Charles Todd – Standalone

Bantam, 2003 – Hardcover

Their grandfather, Francis Hatton, raised Francesca Hatton and her four male cousins, all orphaned at an early age. Each of the cousins has been killed in the Great War, and now Francis is alone to grieve the death of her beloved grandfather, whom she thought she knew. But at the reading of his will, she reads a letter cursing him and his heirs, she inherits two properties about which she never knew, people turn up at the funeral demanding items about which she did not know, and Richard Leighton appears on her doorstep blaming Francis for the disappearance of his mother.

*** If you're expecting a book in the same style as Todd's Inspector Ian Rutledge series, you will be disappointed. However, if you love Gothics, as do I having started Victoria Holt and the early books of Mary Stewart, you will be delighted. There is that underlying air of tension from the first page and twists aplenty along the way to a dramatic conclusion and classic epilogue. I am always looking for a new, good suspenseful Gothic. And this is it.

Lisa Johnson says

Title: The Murder Stone

Author: Charles Todd

Pages: 377

Year: 2003

Publisher: Bantam Dell

This story is set in 1916 in the English countryside in a remote valley. Francesca Hatton has just buried her grandfather after he suffered a stroke and weeks of being bedridden and unable or unwilling to communicate. She grew up with her grandfather in the role of her father as her own parents were killed when she was just two years old. She had no other relatives, so her grandfather took her in. She was raised with her five male cousins who had also lost their parents. As grown men, each of them had enlisted in the Great War and all of them had been killed. Now Francesca is the only surviving member of her family and the vultures begin to descend, wanting things from her. She has no idea what these people want or what they are talking about. Her grandfather kept her very shielded.

As she asks more questions and gets no definite answers, she begins to think she never really knew her grandfather, the one she grew up adoring. Richard Leighton shows up accusing her grandfather of killing his mother years ago. He wants to find out for sure what happened, but makes no bones about it that he holds her grandfather responsible. Francesca staunchly defends her grandfather and so the two quarrel often. More information is unearthed, but is it the truth? Who can Francesca trust? Who will tell her the truth about her grandfather and about herself?

This story contains many turns of the plot with distractions to keep readers guessing as to the outcome. I didn't care for the ending of the story. There was no real resolution of who was related to whom and if the captured soldier was indeed one of Francesca's cousins. I didn't even like Francesca as she proved too capable at killing, even though she justified or rationalized the reasons to herself. Although I could empathize with her searching for answers to the questions various people raised and constantly being met with lies or silence. I have read the Inspector Rutledge series and the Bess Crawford series and enjoyed those stories very much, but this one just didn't connect with me.

My rating is 3 stars.

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Greg says

With the sixth, "A Fearless Doubt", Ian Rutledge book (one that was an unresolved mess to me), I promised myself I'd try one more. This seventh work by Charles Todd is a stand-alone book in which Ian Rutledge

doesn't make an appearance. Sadly, this is the kind of book authors seem to throw out to unsuspecting readers, perhaps because of a looming deadline. This isn't a terrible book, it's just that this genre (gothic romance) has been done and done, most notably by Phyllis A. Whitney and Victoria Holt, and they did it dozens of times during the 1960s and 1970s. (And as I recall, as good or better than this effort.) If you must read a gothic romance, go ahead with the KING of the genre, "Rebecca". And if you've read that, still skip "Murder Stone" and go with "Legend of the Seventh Virgin" by Victoria Holt. As for me, I do miss Ian Rutledge, one of the great sleuths in all of mystery.

Charlene says

I am a big fan of the Charles Todd authored Ian Rutledge series, set in the years immediately after WWI in England. I was disappointed in this stand alone book, which is set during the last years of the war itself. I compulsively finished it but I didn't feel like the mystery was logical, nor did I feel like I understood the characters. I didn't have the feeling "oh, yes, of course, that's how it all must have happened" at the end of the book, with the solving of the mystery -- actually, I was never sure if the mystery was solved at all. Also, this book -- unlike his Ian Rutledge books -- didn't have as strong a sense of time and place. Too many story lines, not enough plausibility with them; recommend sticking with the Ian Rutledge books.

Tara says

This was my first Charles Todd book (I'd gone to a local bookstore in search of the first book in either of Todd's two series, but this was all I could find), and I have a bit of a mental split in what I thought of this book.

On the one hand, I found it really enjoyable to read -- nicely paced plotting, crisp writing, and pretty gripping as I struggled to figure out the truth behind all the secrets exposed by Frances Hatton's death. I also loved the air of good old-fashioned Gothic mystery/romance about it (in fact, it made me realize that I'm itching to re-read some of the classic Gothics I loved so much as a teen).

At the same time, there was a certain point toward the end where I started to feel like there was a bit too much randomness about this story. There are a few scattered chapters from the POV of the heroine's cousins, which had a faint connection to the main plot but really only served to throw off the narrative flow. There was a strangely extraneous thread involving a mysterious person hiding out in the woods, that never really merged into the main plot in a logical (or valuable) way. Even the Murder Stone itself seemed to be shoehorned in as a plot device, rather than something fundamental to the story.

The ending was a bit odd, too. I feel like it COULD have been the kind of ending that you savor like a piece of salted dark chocolate caramels (all dark and savory with a serious bite), but instead it was just a bit too neat, which made it feel more contrived than organic.

Ah well, it was enough of a positive experience that I'll be even more interested in finding the Rutledge or Crawford books now. From the reviews here, it seems that many feel those two series are superior to this book.

Julia says

Unlike other books by Charles Todd This book does not feature Bess Crawford or Inspector Rutledge, and strictly speaking is not a mystery (whodunnit). It is however an excellent gothic also set during WWI and has much of the same feel as his other books.

Francesca Hatton is an orphan who was brought up by her grandfather after her parents died in an accident in Canada. She shared her childhood with five male cousins whose parents had also died, and who were also taken in by their grandfather. When all the cousins die in the war and Francesca's grandfather dies, she finds herself unexpectedly heir to his property and his secrets.

Lea Mckenzie says

I wasn't sure about this one. From the start it was contrived and convoluted. It had far too many plot lines, most glaringly Mrs. Passamore and the shooter. The mystery was enough to keep me reading, but the ending was a sloppy one. I could not say I liked any of the characters either, although the dog was a good sort. Not one of my favorites.

Crossfinn says

I just reread this because I decided to start reading Charles Todd again after several years. I love the time period and the subject matter of the Charles Todd novels, but this one was a disappointment. Most of the text consists of breathless questions such as "Could my grandfather have lied to me about my parents?" "Could this woman actually be Richard's mother?" "Could the body on the murder stone actually have been so-and-so?" without much plot. As another reviewer pointed out, it was soap opera-ish. The ending was a letdown, doing little to justify all the angst that came before it.

Tony says

THE MURDER STONE. (2003). Charles Todd. **.

I never got very far into this novel – the first one by this writer that I've tried. Boring. It started out with all the wrong – for me – vibes. Before the novel begins, the author provides a list of characters This runs from pages xv to xix; I never stopped to count all of them, but there were a bunch. That kind of thing bodes trouble for me. "War and Peace" didn't have that many characters. We are soon introduced to the main character of the book: The Murder Stone. It's a rock that has been in the back yard of a recently deceased gentleman who manages to make its removal a stipulation in his will. Tension builds! When I find myself fighting to keep reading a book, and I'm only twenty pages into its nearly 400, I know how it's going to turn out. I know I'll get lots of flak about these comments by Todd fans, but make it constructive. If you have a favorite of his that would be a better introduction to his works than this one, let me know. I promise I'll try it. All you have to promise is to minimize the amount of mummy dust it contains.

Carol says

This book might have been better had it been more focused and less convoluted. There is a lot of authorly 'how many plot devices can I shoehorn into this thing?'

The plot(s) of this novel doesn't really hold together into an integrated whole. The book rambled on far too long. Most of the inserts by the cousins were irrelevant; the shooter episodes didn't really further the plot and the entire shooter subplot could have been eliminated without any damage to the whole. Does it really matter plot-wise that one of the cousins, now a wee bit mad, has returned? In fact, many episodes could have been eliminated without any damage to the plot. Even the Murder Stone does little to hold the plot together--it's not that important to the novel, let alone making it the title. The last one third of the novel went on and on, and the book's ending stretched credulity to the limit.

Most of the characters were wooden sticks wending their way through the novel. Not even the villainess fared any better. In the end, the book runs out of steam and so do you.

Niki says

I am quite enthusiastic concerning this excellent thriller, at a rather slow pace, where a young woman must deal with people trying to smear the reputation of her beloved grandfather who died shortly after the loss of his five grandsons, who all died in the first world war, the cousins of Francesca Hatton - like in many families there were many things untold, secrets to be revealed and I liked the way that bereft young woman fought to clear her grandfather's name. Thanks to him she had a happy childhood with her cousins, how could such a nice man have been the devil some people pretend he was ? Francesca Hatton is set on finding the truth, but where to start ?

Diane says

This is very different from the other Charles Todd books that I have read. The beginning of the book includes a list of the characters, a quaint but useful feature. There are a lot of characters.

It is not as well written as Todd's other mysteries. When I finished the book I had not marked any passages that I particularly liked which I usually do in Todd's books.

I didn't really understand the attraction between Francesca and Richard. But it seemed to have worked out for them. I was amused at the end of the book to realize that Francesca, although a nice decent person had killed two people. How bizarre!

Barb says

This is the second novel by Charles Todd that I've tried and given up on. I found an unevenness to the writing that distracted me and I had no patience for the redundancy or the leaps in reasoning. Life's too short...moving on.

Jane says

If you're in the mood for a really really good mystery I recommend this Charles Todd stand alone novel. Known for his Ian Rutledge and Bess Crawford series he has not stepped out of that era (WWI) but it is peripheral to the story. Francesca Hatton has been brought up by her grandfather and her five cousins. After her cousins die in the war her grandfather has a stroke and she comes from London to be with him. After he dies a strange and angry (although good looking, of course) man shows up accusing her grandfather of murder. At the funeral another very angry man accuses him of stealing his estate and another is looking for a box her grandfather has promised him. As the story unfolds Francesca learns that everything she thought she knew about her grandfather could be very very wrong. Each angry man has his own story and there are some women that may or may not be who or what they seem. And then there is the shooter... Combination mystery, love story, family secrets - read it and enjoy .

MARGO says

This story was an enjoyable light read, not bad but not fantastic either. At the end of the novel there were still so many unanswered questions which really bothers me. When I get to the end of a book I want all the answers and do not care for things left hanging in the air.

Sandi says

A stand-alone historical that is really more gothic suspense than mystery like the authors' other works that I have read. I enjoyed the plotting and found the young heroine appealing. Lots of atmosphere, secrets, and a bit of romance made this well worth reading.

Amy says

What a strange book. Set in WWI, Francesca Hatton (annoyingly called Cesca by her family) is responsible for handling her dear grandfather's affairs upon his death from illness. Francesca is the last Hatton - her grandfather had raised her and her five male cousins after the respective deaths of their parents, but all five cousins were killed in the war. Francesca adored her grandfather and her happy childhood; however, when various family secrets emerge after the reading of her grandfather's will and events at his funeral, she begins to question whether she really knew him at all.

Francesca is confronted with two pieces of property that she didn't know existed; a disposition requiring her

to remove the murder stone, a large rock she and her cousins used to play on; and the confrontation from a stranger named Richard Leighton that Francis Hatton killed his mother many years ago.

The book was very difficult to get into - the writing was so *italicized* and melodramatic and there were galore. The book was written in third person, but frequently would be inside Francesca's tortured head. At first, I thought it was appalling, but once I realized it was *intended* to be written in a very gothic style, I adjusted and began really enjoying the story. Francesca is more of a Marian Halcombe than a Laura Fairlie - she had spunk and constantly reminded herself that SHE WAS A HATTON for crying out loud whenever there were dangerous or emotionally annoying situations to be confronted. And Leighton is certainly a brooding hero. And of course, there are the loyal old servants who go around muttering things like "it ain't right" whenever some evil person comes to besmirch Francis Hatton's good name.

So, I thought it was pretty okay but there were so many things that I was/am still confused about:

1. The family mysteries - perhaps I wasn't paying close attention, but was it resolved whether Francesca and her cousins were really her grandfather's grandchildren? Was Francis Francesca's father (so alliterative)? Was Victoria truly Francesca's mother? Where was she in all the intervening years after leaving her family and popping up to ruin Francesca's wedding? Was she the one who sent all the notes?

2. Also at one point when talking about his mother's disappearance, Leighton expressed that he had thought an old man like Francis could never physically please a woman like his mother, but after seeing a picture of the old dawg, changed his mind. Ew, on many levels.

3. The cousins. This could have easily been about Francesca and maybe one cousin, if that, but instead there was an unnecessary amount of dead cousins. They never distinguished themselves in my mind, even though they were constantly referred to by the single personality trait that defined them. For example, Robin was always referred to as practical. You could not read his name without someone also saying "well, that was Robin...always practical" or "practical Robin always had a back up plan" or even Robin's own narration "I have always been practical." Even their strange ghostly voice over chapters were indistinguishable from one another.

4. The multitude of plotlines. I understand we need several suspects to make it an interesting mystery. BUT there was so much going on and little follow through. Just one example is the shooter. Why was there a shooter? Who was he shooting - just cows? Was he trying to kill people? WAS IT REALLY PETER? So many mysteries, so little time.

4. The ending. So. Victoria emerges and we learn that she is a pretty terrible person. She didn't give two figs about her new husband and small Richard and essentially disappeared so that she could embark on a one woman mission to bring Francis down. She tells Francesca that she is her mother (!) and that Francis is her father (!!) so she cannot marry Leighton because he is her half brother and if Francesca ignores her, she will interrupt the wedding and confess all - shattering Leighton's image of his angelic, martyred mother and rendering Leighton's half sister illegitimate in the process. So Francesca frets about what to do and then, when Victoria comes again to issue her final warning, SHOOTS AND KILLS HER. And covers it up with the help from aforementioned servants and gets married and lives happily ever after. The End. I don't even know what to think about this. I guess I'm glad Victoria died because how else were Richard and Francesca going to live happily ever after, but she MURDERS her future mother-in-law / possibly own mother in cold blood ON HER WEDDING DAY and was like, oh hehoha, time to get to the church. The mind boggles.

Pat says

Very disappointed. I greatly enjoy Todd's Ian Rutledge & Bess Crawford series. Here they were trying to do a romance along with the mystery. The romance fell completely short. Diana Gabaldon's Outlander series has me forever jaded but even without that comparison ... The whole plotting was very weak but it was readable enough that I could easily finish the book.
