

BOOK REVIEW: What Doesn't Kill Us by Ajay Close

What Doesn't Kill Us by Ajay Close will be published by [Saraband](#) on 8 February 2024.

On 2 January 1981, over five years after committing his first murder, Peter Sutcliffe was finally arrested just a mile from writer Ajay Close's then home in Sheffield. In her latest novel Close (now based in Perth) combines a gripping page turner set firmly in late 1970s Yorkshire with a wider, excoriating, examination of the misogyny, racism and extremism that continue to blight so many lives today.

'(the perpetrator)... has made it clear that he hates prostitutes. Many people do. We, as a police force, will continue to arrest prostitutes. But the Ripper is now killing innocent girls. That indicates your mental state and that you are in urgent need of medical attention. You have made your point. Give yourself up before another innocent woman dies.'

(Senior West Yorkshire detective Jim Hobson, October 1979.)

'Soliciting carries the death penalty now', Nikki said.

Yorkshire 1979. Someone is butchering women. Most are sex workers, a few are not. Women are terrified, arming themselves with anything from a carving knife to a frozen chicken. Every man is a suspect. Rumour is rife. It might be your husband, your son, your window cleaner.

The police are getting nowhere. In the lads' environment of a police force rife with sexism and racism, PC Liz Seeley is desperate for promotion to get away from the daily grind of 'women's' jobs: school road safety visits, lost dogs and stand-in lollipop duties;

'They did let women into CID, but only one per office.'

Then that one woman (who's slept her way up the ladder) is ill, and Liz is asked to stand in for her. This is her one chance.

Meanwhile Charmaine, a young Black artist, is chasing her own dreams. She wants to get onto the diploma course at the poly, but the odds are stacked against her. She longs for

'Durable tumblers of chianti in the theatre bar, the midnight screening of a French new Wave classic, a solo exhibition in a London gallery.'

Instead she is stuck in Leeds. Like Liz she comes from a working-class background; for her the barriers are reinforced by the colour of her skin. The diploma will be her way out. But just as Liz has to fight for everything at work, so Charmaine has to deal with sex-obsessed male students and a patronising, smug tutor who thinks he's radical because he doesn't wear a tie and is 'too right-on to give grades';

'He'd wanted her to make art about golliwogs and minstrel shows, or photograph herself in whiteface dressed as a bishop, a general, a High Court judge. She asked if he'd suggested any of the other students use their bodies as a medium?'

Then, coincidentally, both Liz and Charmaine discover 109 Cleopatra Street, a women's collective in Chapeltown. The residents all have their reasons for living there; abusive

partners, abusive parents, abusive pimps;

'Generation after generation of selfish men and bitter women.'

Charmaine starts visiting Cleopatra Street every week. Liz, escaping her own violent boyfriend, moves in. But Liz is a police officer; she can't reveal this to the women, or let her male colleagues know where she's living. She is obliged to lead a double life.

The murders continue.

Close perfectly captures the mood of a community under siege. The fear on the streets is palpable. And of course it is the women who are told to stay home, always have a male escort, 'watch themselves.' No-one ever thinks of imposing a curfew on men.

What Doesn't Kill Us brilliantly recreates the vibe of late 20th century second wave feminism, the era of *Spare Rib*, *Reclaim the Night* marches, Susie Orbach, Annie Oakley, Germaine Greer. Women taking a stand for perhaps the first time since the days of the Suffragettes.

The Cleopatra Street women are determined to fight back, both against the killer and against male violence in general, but they remain fairly low-key, holding consciousness-raising meetings to air their grievances, supporting one another, sharing the childcare, accepting that some are still in heterosexual relationships.

Everything changes when a radical, entitled activist moves into the house. Rowena urges the women to take extreme measures; talking about it is not enough, she wants action, preferably violent. Close skilfully shows the effect this uncompromising hardliner has on each of the women, and asks, can such rabid fanaticism ever be justified, even for causes

to which we are deeply committed?

As tensions on the streets and in the house approach a climax, both Liz and the Cleopatra Street women must make tough decisions.

What Doesn't Kill Us reminds those of us who were there just how rampant sexism was 40 years ago. The comments of Liz's co-workers seem shocking to us now; when Liz turns up in trousers for her first day in plain clothes, she's told to go and buy a skirt at lunchtime, 'and make it a short one' – and this is one of the milder incidents. But although such 'banter' is no longer acceptable in the workplace, how much has really changed? The current resurgence of venom and violence against any minority group in our society shows that the veneer of equality and acceptance is paper thin.

AJ Close has succeeded in writing a riveting, thought-provoking novel with acutely observed and convincing characters. It's a story, too, that works on many levels; we find ourselves wondering not only who the killer is and whether he will be caught, but also whether radical extremism is ever justifiable; if and how minority groups can challenge the status quo – and whether they will ever succeed; if feminism or socialism is the more urgent cause, or whether they are simply two sides of the same fight. Close is such a talented writer that she prompts us to consider these issues as a by-product of the story; there are no lectures here, nor any conclusions but our own.

Ajay Close's website is [here](#).

The 2023 ITV drama *The Long Shadow*, starring Toby Jones and Katherine Kelly, focuses on the lives of the women attacked by Sutcliffe, their families, and the much criticised police investigation. It is available on STV Player until 4th February 2024.



Ajay Close

"Ajay Close is brilliant. Her eye for the dreadful detail ... is acute."

FAY WELDON

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