

Rumpole and the Reign of Terror

By John Mortimer, Viking, New York, 184 pages, \$ 23.95

Reviewed by Ronald W. Meister

The care and feeding of the literary character in old age has perplexed many authors, not all of whom succeed in maintaining a consistent chronology when their characters age. British writers, in particular, often seem to lose control of their timelines, especially when characters they created in the prime of life enjoy unexpected longevity.

A prime example is the nautical novelist Patrick O'Brian. Having begun his Aubrey-Maturin saga too late in the Napoleonic Wars to accommodate an eventual twenty volumes before Waterloo, he was forced to invent a series of fictional years, like 1813A and B, to fit in all the action. More subtly, Conan Doyle, having prematurely killed off his hero, was compelled to compose *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as a "memoir" of earlier years. Although he later succumbed to popular pressure and brought Holmes back from the dead, Dr. Watson's continuing carelessness with dates (and wives) continues to bedevil Holmes's biographers.

Agatha Christie seemed to care little about chronology, though she ultimately geriatricized Poirot and did away with him in *Curtain*, a novel she allowed to be published only after her own death. George MacDonald Fraser, whose Flashman books were recently found to be on George Bush's reading list, avoids the problem altogether by haphazardly discovering packets of memoirs from random periods of his hero's career.

C. S. Forester, who wrote about the young Hornblower only after elevating him to flag rank, is that rarity among authors who took pains to adhere to a consistent timeline, and did so with sufficient (though not impeccable) care that C. Northcote Parkinson was able to write a coherent biography of his fictional character.

The problem of chronology particularly afflicts Horace Rumpole, the Old Bailey hack whose legal career is catalogued in fourteen volumes of stories by the prolific John Mortimer, the author as well of thirteen novels, eleven plays and three volumes of autobiography. Sir John has been dealing with a superannuated protagonist for over 25 years, in no fewer than 67 stories.

If the Mikado's Pooh-Bah was born sneering, Rumpole was born in late middle age. He was already in his sixties in *Rumpole for the Defence* (1981), and has been considering hanging up his wig since at least 1979, in *Rumpole and the Age of Retirement*, when, like Tennyson, he longed "To sail beyond the sunset and the baths/Of all the western stars." Since then, he has retired more times than Bill Parcells. The opening of *Rumpole's Return* in 1980 found him and the not-so-devoted Hilda, She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied, at leisure in, of all places, south Florida. Ultimately exchanging the dubious pleasures of Boca Raton for those of Battersea and Brixton, he tried *Rumpole's Last Case* in 1987, only to return in several more volumes, culminating in *Rumpole Rests His Case* in 2001, at the end of which

he suffered a near-fatal heart attack. But there is more. Not to be bumped off prematurely, or even seasonably, he escaped his convalescent home in *Rumpole and the Primrose Path*, where Mortimer left him, apparently rejuvenated, in 2002. Since then, the only news of our hero had come in the retrospective report of his triumph in the early 1950's, *Rumpole and the Penge Bungalow Murders*, published in 2004.

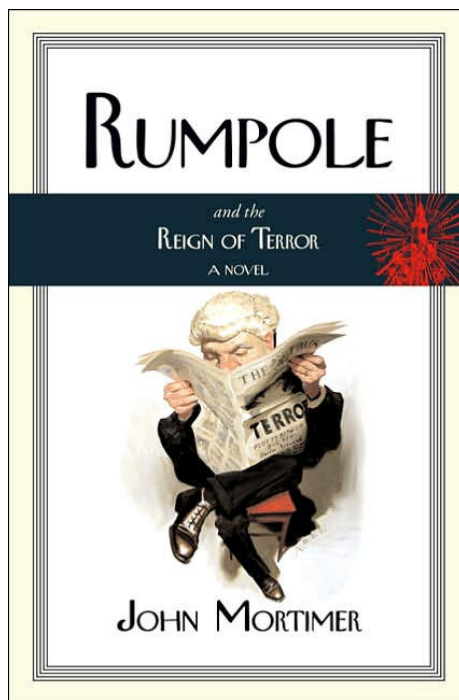
Now, happily, after a literary detour to publish a delightful collection of essays (*Where There's A Will*) and a mediocre novel (*Quite Honestly*), Sir John has returned to what he does best. The sage of Pomeroy's Wine Bar re-appears in fine fettle in *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror*, a novel centering on the prosecution of a Pakistani doctor under Britain's equivalent of the USA-PATRIOT Act.

Mortimer's forte is the short story, and he has only twice before stretched Rumpole across the pages of a full-length novel. The stretch marks here are apparent, as he fills out the tale with a dozen chapters from Hilda's memoirs, which add little narrative drive. Hilda had her say years ago, in the form of a long letter included in the collection, *Rumpole and the Angel of Death*, but she is a one-dimensional character unable to support lengthy passages of self-analysis.

Indeed, not only Hilda, but most of Mortimer's characters except the main protagonist have flattened out with age, and their incidental parts are entirely predictable. The loyal solicitor Bonny Bernard, the clueless colleague Claude Erskine-Brown, the villainous but oddly honorable Fred Timson, and others, have all become stock characters, who strut and fret their moment on the stage, signifying little. That is their charm.

This tale, however, is less about character and more overtly political than its predecessors. Mortimer takes as his epigraph a quotation from Joseph Conrad, "The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket," and his displeasure with British disdain for the rights of the accused, under the guise of combatting terrorism, has a sharp edge. Mortimer's views on prosecutorial overreaching are set out in his autobiographical volumes, and in his recent essays. Rumpole himself has defended international human rights (*Rumpole and the Rights of Man*) and represented refugees (*Rumpole and the Asylum Seekers*), and he has made a career of representing the downtrodden and the accused, but his invocation of Magna Carta and habeas corpus has extra impact when juxtaposed with current headlines.

Through his usual combination of dogged persistence and incisive cross-examination, and his fierce sense of justice, Rumpole positions his case so that a *deus ex machina* can bring *R. v. Khan* to a satisfactory conclusion. No matter that the sub-plots are weak, the supporting characters cartoonish and the outcome predictable. Rumpole is as comfortable as an old Wellington boot. Neither he nor his favorite vintage, Chateau Thames Embankment, has aged or mellowed, and may they never do so.



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