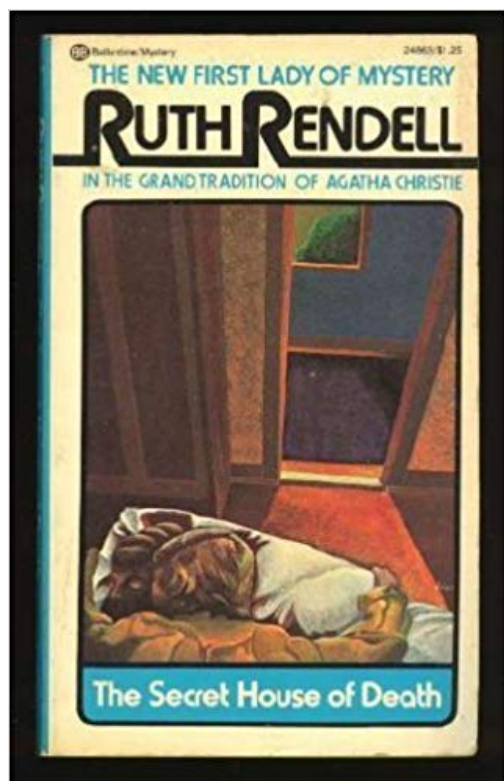


## The Secret House of Death *by* Ruth Rendell



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Louise North doesn't care what the neighbors think. She lets her lover leave his car just outside her house in broad daylight, telling everyone a cockamamie story about him being a central heating salesman. Still, it's a shock when she's found shot dead, covered by the equally dead body of the "salesman." Now Susan Townsend -- the Norths' next-door neighbor, who discovers the bodies -- must help Louise's husband, Bob, get back on his feet. But is she helping a neighbor . . . or a murderer?



## Reviews of the *The Secret House of Death* *by* Ruth Rendell

GawelleN

This book was a Birthday gift for my sister, who is a fan of the author. She loved it!

Ichalote

Ok

Manona

The Secret House of Death (1968) was another of Ruth Rendell's early-career amateur sleuth whodunits, and not a bad one. The narrative perspective is fragmented among three characters, primarily Susan Townsend, a divorcee with a young son who discovers the bodies of her next door

neighbor and the man she is rumored to be having an affair with, victims of an apparent murder-suicide. Later, we get chapters from the perspective of a young man, David Chadwick, who had been a casual friend of the dead man and who begins to doubt the official murder-suicide verdict in the case, and a few from the perspective of Ulph, a police detective who also has his doubts about the official verdict but feels his hands are tied.

Frankly, I thought Ulph was wasted as a character. His only role seems to be to discourage Chadwick's attempts to get to the bottom of the case, similar to the obstructionist role Rendell's most famous series detective, Inspector Wexford, played in a previous Rendell book, *The Sins of the Fathers*. I would have preferred a little more action from Ulph's perspective, as well as a little more action from Ulph generally. He seems incredibly passive for a police professional who smells a major crime.

Still, this is a satisfying mystery despite a rather blatant coincidence that helps lead to the resolution.

GAZANIK

I've read no Ruth Rendell before, but having eventually worked my way through all the traditional mystery writers of quality in the English language, I've had to move onto some uneven material in recent years. Finally, I've gotten around to Ms. Rendell, and, totally randomly, the first novel of hers I've read is *THE SECRET HOUSE OF DEATH*.

What I discovered (after recent disappointments with P.D. James novels of this same vintage) was that Ms. Rendell delivers everything that a seasoned reader of mysteries could ask for: interesting characters, subtly detailed observations of everyday people (in this case primarily husbands and housewives in "suburban" London) and, of course, a fascinating mystery which lurks unsettlingly behind the superficial exterior of a crime whose details we get to know within the first third of the book.

Ms. Rendell briskly moves back and forth between the perspectives of a few characters until ultimately we are seeing the unfolding of the story through the eyes of three people: the two main unconnected protagonists (Susan Townsend and David Chadwick) and the quietly thoughtful Inspector Ulph.

The writing is effortless but first-rate. The unfolding of material (and clues) is done efficiently and in a way which captures your attention while still provoking your curiosity, never giving too much away and yet inexorably giving us the details we need to attempt to construct the network of evidence on our own.

Based on this book, I look forward to reading many more of Ruth Rendell's novels. I feel that once again I'm in good hands. And, as an added bonus, she seems to capture a quality that I've long admired in a less well-known British mystery novelist, E. X. Ferrars: namely the ability to draw a fully-realised domestic situation and draw you into the story by allowing you to get to know the dynamic of people in their homes, their everyday concerns, their social pressures and awkwardnesses, their little joys.

There's nothing "spectacular" about this book -- the field of characters is fairly small, and the world they traverse doesn't intersect too many other people in the course of the book. But it's a book that seems to have the sure hand of someone who knows both how to write a good mystery, and how to present real-seeming and interesting "middle-class" characters. There was nothing dreary about it, nothing marked with the kind of glib weariness or cynicism of P.D. James' novels from the late 60s or early 70s. It's a novel filled with people "doing their best," and familiar to most of us.

I recommend it very highly indeed!

Reddefender

Ruth Rendell is a brilliant writer of psychological suspense and mysteries. She is noted for her quirky characters and unlikely killers, many of whom seem quite ordinary. What they all seem to have is a dark side that manifests itself in the deadliest ways. This book is no exception.

Here, an attractive young woman, Louise North, who lives in a suburban housing complex, is incessantly gossiped about by her neighbors. It seems that that when her handsome husband, Bob, leaves for work, Louise gets a male visitor whom all the neighbors think is her lover. Her neighbors marvel at the brazenness of this hussy living in their well-ordered midst. Imagine the boldness of Louise in having her lover park his car right in front of her home. What if her husband were to come home unexpectedly?

When her next door neighbor, divorcee Susan Townsend, is inveigled by a distraught Louise to come over for coffee, Susan only reluctantly agrees, not wanting to be drawn into any sordid disclosures. After all, she does not engage in any of the vile gossip surrounding Louise and her romantic encounters with the mysterious gentleman caller. Still, the next day she goes to Louise's home at the appointed hour, only to find Louise and her ostensible lover locked in a deadly embrace.

Naturally, under the circumstances, Susan and Bob find themselves drawing towards each other. Bob seeks out Susan, becoming a regular visitor, and before she knows it, Susan finds that she is more than happy to comfort Bob, and a relationship of sorts develops. Susan, however, gets a feeling as if she were a moth being drawn towards a flame. Something is askew. There is something wrong with the entire picture! She just doesn't know what. Slowly the pieces come together with the help of a stranger named David Chadwick. It may just be that things were not at all what they seemed in that cloistered suburban household inhabited by the Norths.

This is an intriguing little mystery, though the characters are not as quirky or edgy as in many of the author's other books. Moreover, the mystery is not that much of a surprise, as the clues are all there for the discerning reader to piece together. Still, there are enough twists and turns to make for an entertaining, fast paced read. It is a book that will be enjoyed by all those who love a well-written mystery.

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