

BOOKS

## GOOD READS

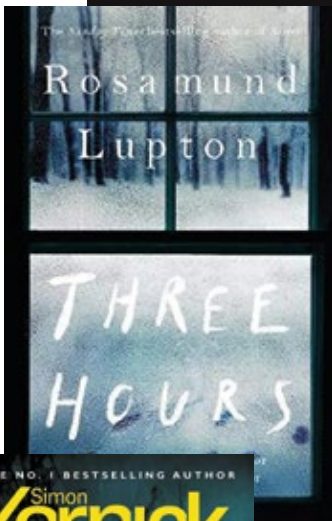
Four thrillers to get the blood pumping. By *Richard Hopton*

The thriller is now over a hundred years old, its oldest forebears being Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. We all know a thriller when we read one: a novel with a sensational story, tersely written and shorn of literary flourish, thrillers are not intended to force the reader to consider his place in the world or challenge his preconceptions. They are entertainments, diversions, pieces of literary escapism, books for airport lounges, beaches and insomniac nights. In the last century, however, the genre has broadened enormously leaving its upright, square-jawed, Edwardian heroes and their dastardly, underhand, foreign adversaries far behind. Nowadays, thrillers take many forms as these four novels demonstrate.

**Three Hours** by Rosamund Lupton (*Viking, £14.99*) is a terrific novel, which grabs the reader from the first page. It tells the story, minute by minute, of an attack by two gunmen on a school in rural Somerset on a snowy November morning. It is every parent's worse nightmare: we know it happens – we've seen it on TV – but cannot imagine that it will ever happen to us. But here, on a school day like any other, it does. Lupton weaves together the different strands of the story: the unfolding horror seen by the captive children and staff inside; the wary, determined police and the distraught parents on the outside.

The novel tells a story of compulsive horror in the course of which it touches on many themes which confound modern society. Teenage alienation, and parental incomprehension and helplessness in the face of it, is a major theme of the novel, as is the radicalisation of young people and the role of social media. This is a thriller but it says much about uncomfortable subjects we all prefer not to address.

The second novel, **Die Alone** by Simon Kernick (*Century, £12.99*) is a more traditional thriller. Its heroes are two tough ex-cops, one of whom, Ray Mason, is in prison for murder. The villain is a British politician with aspirations to No. 10 Downing Street, no less,



with long-standing links to organised crime and a taste for raping and murdering young women. The story races along in spare, thriller-writer's prose, full of practical and operational detail, a world of tangled motives and divided loyalties, before reaching an action-packed climax.

The third, **Launch Code** by Michael Ridpath (*Corvus, £12.99*) is a thriller with a more subtle, reflective tone. Its origins lie in events which took place on an American nuclear submarine deep beneath the Norwegian Sea in autumn of 1983. The novel winds up more circumspectly than in many thrillers, flipping between the present and the past, but is full of convincing detail, in this case the US naval protocols for nuclear engagement. At the heart of this story is a moral dilemma about conflicting loyalties.

Holly Watt is a well-known investigative reporter who made her name uncovering the Westminster expenses scandal. **To The Lions** (*Bloomsbury, £12.99*), her first novel, won the Crime Writers' Association Ian Fleming Steel Dagger award. As befits an investigative reporter, this is a thriller in which the story is the story. Ace reporter

Casey Benedict stumbles upon a conspiracy which she then pursues with all the guile and tenacity of her trade. The action moves from her newspaper's high-octane, foul-mouthed London newsroom to the desolate wastes of the north African desert via louche bars in Mayfair, swanky clubs on the Côte d'Azur and human tragedy of the Middle East's refugee camps. Watt is good on the mechanics of establishing a story and adept at conjuring up the cynical self-indulgence of her characters. ■

