

BOOKS

Liars, stalkers and snipers populate in the latest crime novels

Jeff Noon reviews detective fiction from Nicholas Searle, Thomas W. Hodgkinson, Ragnar Jónasson and Tim Baker

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We fully expect con artists to be caught in a sting themselves, but even with that thought constantly in mind I was still hoodwinked by Nicholas Searle's *The Good Liar* (Viking, £12.99, pp. 288). The surprises start on page one: Roy Courtnay is in his nineties, with a longstanding pedigree of swindles behind him, and he relishes the idea of one last scam. His mark is Betty, a woman he meets via an internet dating site. Roy's a slippery character, who adopts, or even steals, new identities as he chooses. It's all about disguise, and telling a good lie. The perfect lie.

There are dangers, not least existential. At one point he speaks of the difficulty of maintaining 'the flickering self that was Roy Courtnay'. A series of personas are added one on top of the other, and a journey back into second world war Germany reveals the moment when Roy's first mask slips into place, as the requirement to lie becomes a matter of life and death. With Betty he seems to have a way out of the constant need to dissemble, if only he could put the scam aside. In the end, however, even love is seen to be a confidence trick.

ADVERTISING

If Jack Raphael is genuinely in love in Thomas W. Hodgkinson's *Memoirs of a Stalker* (Silvertail, £10.99, pp. 268), it's a love twisted beyond all normality. Following rejection by his girlfriend, Mills, he decides to follow her. His stalking takes place entirely in her house. He moves in without Mills or her flatmate knowing, gliding silently around the rooms, inhabiting alcoves, niches and cubbyholes. He prowls and slinks from one blind spot to another, all the time watching and listening. The girls throw a dinner party and Jack is there, a whisper, a shadow. A scribbled note in Mills's copy of *The End of the Affair* reads: 'The invisible style. Greene writes so well, he ceases to exist.' Paradoxically, as Jack fades into the wallpaper, Hodgkinson becomes more prominent. His style fills every sentence to bursting, with puns, rhymes, manic wordplay, even pages of film script. Jack is the unseen point of view shot, gazing with hope and despair on the object of his dreams. When he's forced to kill in order to maintain his secrecy, the novel becomes a brilliantly surreal thriller. Even at the end, we're unsure if the killer has truly left the house, or whether he still walks there, hidden in the words.