

## LITTLE DEATHS \* MISSION \* NARRATIVE

Simon's mission is to resolve his guilt and grief over various life mistakes he has made in the past and to become a better detective and a better father. The lesson he learns is that commitment to life and to other people involves risk and suffering. There is no safe place, but one must remain committed all the same. At the start of the book Simon is in a state of denial that masks his anguish and guilt about certain events in his life, including his actions during the Crimean War and the Clerkenwell bombing, and his inability to prevent Rachel's and Leah's deaths. By the end, passing through stages of bargaining, anger, and depression, he will have recommitted himself to work, to family, and to the possibility of new love.

An important part of Simon's mission is to realize there are no simple dichotomies in life between good and evil, black and white. Rather, much of life is defined by shades of gray. Simon historically has defined himself as a "good guy," therefore someone who cannot do wrong. His job is to prevent wrong. When Rachel dies, he feels he was unable to protect her, that he somehow failed at doing good. Perhaps more directly, his sexual appetites (a base, "evil" instinct if not controlled) may have contributed to her death. Guilt over her death is compounded by guilt regarding his daughter's death, both building on dormant guilt over the Crimea and Clerkenwell.

Initially we see Simon coping with his guilt and shame by denial and withdrawal. He withdraws from the family and he withdraws from work. Simon does not admit this withdrawal. In his own eyes, he has come to terms with the losses life has dealt him and is functioning adequately. However, both his home and work environments are concerned about his dysfunction. Concern at work takes two forms. Murdoch both prods him to get back on the job, and begins to think he can make a name for himself by filling the space from which Wise seems to have withdrawn. Superintendent Walker criticizes Wise for doing a poor job and begins to think how to get rid of him.

Subjected to a barrage of criticism at home and at work, Wise begins to bargain. He will be more attentive to the children, will come home earlier, will spend a Sabbath with them if they will stop attacking his image of a good father. Similarly, the high-profile Fairhaven case is a vehicle to prove to both his superiors and subordinates that he is still a good detective and competent at his job. Further, he has met Lady Penelope, and he begins to wonder whether he might not get a second chance at love. The generic bargain here is that if he tries harder and risks even the illusion of involvement he will be redeemed - his image as a "good" man will no longer be challenged.

However, Wise becomes increasingly angry at home and obsessed about the Fairhaven case at work. His bargain isn't working. His children see through his attempts to placate them with minimal attention, and still are craving his emotional connection with them. Henrietta refuses to be patronized by Simon for her feminist views, and wants him to see her as a three-dimensional human being. His relationship with Lady Penelope is complicated by his need to use the relationship to vindicate himself as a "good" person.

Wise cannot solve the Fairhaven murder. He desperately wants the perpetrator to be Sir G, so that he can punish a guilty husband, and thereby indirectly punish himself. (Murdoch, who is known for wild flights of fancy, keeps suggesting numerous other suspects, notably Rothschild). Simon becomes determined to bring down Sir G - it becomes a personal vendetta.

Wise is driven around this investigation because he hopes, if he can solve this crime, he will have some peace about Rachel., and his past, and will have confirmed himself in his own eyes as a good guy, one of the upholders of the order in the world.

On the other hand, Simon is indifferent to the baby deaths (has a blind spot about them). This is because he still blames Emily for Rachel's death, so he will not have to face blaming himself. He has wished in the past that Emily might die, and sympathizes with parents who might neglect or abandon them similar children. The childless Murdoch, on the other hand, is moved by these helpless creatures. Also, he sees this investigation as a potentially good career move. He spawns a multitude of ideas about a baby murder ring, and pursues these vigorously with Constable Brown. Tension increases between Murdoch and Wise as Wise continues to put minimal effort into this situation and mock Murdoch's efforts, especially when they seem to implicate Brantley, whom Talbot has vouched for.

Wise is unable to consider Talbot as a suspect in either case because he has defined him as a "good" man, committed to helping children, and a friend of the family. If Talbot is on the side of the angels, then he can do no wrong. Good men do not do bad things. In any case, Wise cannot entertain the possibility of his being guilty of any crime.

Murdoch's death shows Wise 1) his personal issues and obsession with solving the Fairhaven case led him to make a fatal error in judgment 2) no one is completely guilty or innocent 3) the responsibility he shares for Murdoch's death cannot impede continued involvement in life. He realizes that if, as he believes, he committed a mental murder of the soldier in the Crimea, contributed to the outcome of the Clerkenwell bombing and the maiming of Inspector Turner, and was unable to protect Rachel or Leah from death, he bears much more direct responsibility for Murdoch's killing. In this most overt confrontation, he is unable to avoid his guilt, and he briefly contemplates suicide. But he then realizes that suicide is a coward's way, that he owes a duty to the dead that he cannot discharge if he escapes from life. Also, by Penelope modeling understanding and acceptance when he confesses to her, he learns something about self-forgiveness. Although he now acknowledges himself to impure, imperfect, he sees he still has a charge to execute. Although the cases are both officially closed, he feels a sense of obligation to Murdoch to continue investigating, just as he feels a sense of obligation to his wife to stand by his children. Talbot's abduction of Rebecca and Emily precipitates the resolution of the book, in which Wise, recognizing his limitations and guilt, nevertheless chooses to take action to bring Talbot to justice, discharge his obligations to the dead, and open himself to new possibilities in life.