

# Book Wars

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

## DELVE INTO DARK FAMILY SECRETS

### THE WYCH ELM

**Stylist contributor Zoë Apostolides backs *The Wych Elm* by Tana French (£14.99, Penguin Viking), out now**

The American-Irish writer Tana French has a CV many crime novelists would die for: since 2007, the six books that form her Dublin Murder Squad series have won major awards, been translated into 35 languages and are currently being turned into a BBC miniseries. This latest novel is a standalone departure, which focuses on a regular citizen caught up in a crime.

Toby is a well-educated, golden-haired 28-year-old living and working in Dublin – innately lucky, he believes, his life has been privileged and happy. This all changes on the night a pair of violent robbers break in to his home, leaving him hospitalised and later jabbing at panic buttons in a house that no longer feels like home.

When his uncle is diagnosed with cancer, Toby uses the opportunity of a few months' respite to leave his home and move into his old school-holiday haunt, The Ivy House, in order to care for him. Soon after, a skull is found in the garden's ancient wych elm. Toby, along with his cousins and childhood playmates Leon and Susanna, start digging for the truth.

French is very good at creating cosy havens with an underlay of foreboding, and the Ivy House has an otherworldly quality as Toby navigates this "new surreal chessboard" of police tape, reporters and incessant questioning. The claustrophobia of the place, once loved for its seclusion, makes for uncomfortable reading. But the ghostly wych elm, the meat of the story, takes 150 pages to reach, making for an odd structure with a melodramatic, tacked-on ending. It needs an edit: as with much else, the best crime novels have a sweet-spot length.

French and Beckerman both explore concealment within families, and for the protagonists of *If Only I Could Tell You*, jealousy and lies cause decades of estrangement and recriminations. Its tragic revelation is as understandable as it is problematic, and the feeling of isolation within an intimate relationship is well evoked. Still, French wins: when she ratchets up the tension it's palpable, with occasional glimmers of the taut suspense she's celebrated for.

★★★★☆



### IF ONLY I COULD TELL YOU

**Stylist contributor Lauren Wigley votes for *If Only I Could Tell You* by Hannah Beckerman (£14.99, Orion), out now**

I was amazed at just how quickly I became addicted to *If Only I Could Tell You*. Without consciously noticing, I felt my mind constantly drifting back to the carefully considered yet powerful prose. Protagonist Audrey is wrapped up in a 30-year-old secret, which involves her two grown-up and very much estranged daughters. The fast-paced switch between perspectives and eras (from the Eighties to the present day) make for a thickly weaved web of intrigue.

Suffering with a serious illness, Audrey tries to navigate the tumultuous relationship of her two daughters, while coping with her poor physical health. Piece by piece the trauma of the

past is brought to light, unveiling hidden truths and skewed perspectives that have resulted in a devastating family rupture. Beckerman's delicate and ingenious writing makes it feel as though you are eavesdropping on intimate conversations, while feeling a full and deeply affecting spectrum of emotions. The urgency of the mystery is something that leaves you guessing until the last minute, it's a truly tortuous experience. Beckerman swings you through time to gather nuggets of information, building a picture of the tantalising tapestry that unfolds piece by piece.

Similarly, *The Wych Elm* is a mystery novel that builds slowly but gathers serious traction, when you are dropped right in the middle of a whirlwind. The dimension of characters and layers of circumstance wrapped up in this immersive tale is uncomfortable at times and almost tangible in

the raw emotion threaded through the pages. With the discovery of a skull, this is a much more obvious 'murder mystery' theme, but French is excellent at keeping you constantly awash with curiosity.

I absolutely adored *If Only I Could Tell You* and found myself equally lifted and heartbroken. The compelling writing brought the characters to life in a way that was relatable and poignant. It's a novel based around a secret, but the portrayal of family life gives hope that despite the destructive power of silence, love can triumph in the end.

★★★★☆

### The verdict: *If Only I Could Tell You* kills it...

Tana French is without doubt one of the best thriller writers in contemporary fiction, and with the standalone story of *The Wych Elm* she's able to conjure up a taut, addictive and properly chilling thriller that is pure reading joy. However, this week we just can't get enough of Hannah Beckerman's *If Only I Could Tell You*. It's a tightly wound knot of a story which you're desperate to unpick. One of those books that grabs your heart, brain and soul and refuses to let go long past finishing time. Do not miss it.