

guardian.co.uk

Death's head boy

Matthew Lewin is charmed by a serial killer's fourth outing

Matthew Lewin

The Guardian, Saturday 28 February 2009

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

We have become used to our heroes in crime fiction being seriously flawed individuals, prone to alcoholism, anger management problems, depression, marital catastrophe or simple ennui. More recently our moral ground has shifted so that we can root for thugs such as Tony Soprano and even monsters such as Hannibal Lecter who, by his third appearance, had become an almost likeable character.

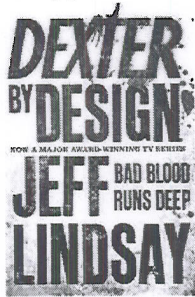
Dexter by Design

by Jeff Lindsay

320pp,

Orion,

£12.99



[Buy at the Guardian bookshop](#)

The latest morally dubious character is Jeff Lindsay's Dexter Morgan, a dyed-in-the-wool psychopathic serial killer who likes nothing more than a long night in with a bound victim and some very sharp knives. He's also the star of the award-winning TV series, Dexter. There have been a few whimpers of outrage (the US Parents Television Council called him a "blackened fillet of soul") but the public has taken Dexter to their hearts. How does Lindsay get away with it? Well, simply by keeping a very light touch on what it is that Dexter actually does, and with a great deal of humour - there are genuinely funny situations, very clever plots and many excellent one-liners. Dexter has a way of - ouch - getting under your skin and making you like him.

The poor boy was unimaginably traumatised as a child by the bloody murder of his mother. He was saved from becoming a crazed, random serial killer by his adoptive father, police hero Harry Morgan, who instead taught him to be a responsible, focused serial killer - dispatching only seriously bad people (notably child murderers) who have somehow managed to evade the law. So Dexter is a hero after all, ridding the world of nasty undesirables. And he functions perfectly well in his rather appropriate job as a blood spatter analyst for the Miami police.

In this book, the fourth in the series, the police are hunting a murderous performance artist who has a habit of arranging dead bodies as art exhibits,

their emptied cavities filled with tropical fruit, or their heads replaced with flowers and human intestines. Dexter quickly concludes that this is not the work of "a normal, well adjusted psychopathic killer" like himself.

Things go badly awry when Dexter's sister, homicide sergeant Debbie Morgan, gets stabbed by a suspect. She is in hospital fighting for her life when Dexter goes after the knifeman and does to him what he does best - but it turns out that, for once, he got the wrong man. Even worse, he has unwittingly been filmed while at work, and the performance artist is threatening not only to show the film to the world but also to kill someone close to Dexter.

The rest of the book is the highly entertaining account of how Dexter juggles all the opposing forces in his life, from the attentions of the killer and suspicions of police detectives to the safety of his new wife and stepchildren (also traumatised as toddlers and well on their way, under Dexter's expert tuition, to becoming monsters in their own right) - while all the while trying not to get caught and spend the rest of his life in jail. Apart from a pretty pointless journey to Cuba, which feels tacked on to the plot as a kind of travelogue, this is another very successful encounter with the wickedly entertaining Dexter.

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010