

LEEDS NORTHERN STAR MAGAZINE BOOK REVIEW

King Solomon's Carpet by Barbara Vine, published by Viking, £8.99

King Solomon's Carpet is one of those novels which goes nowhere fast, yet takes 356 pages to get there. It gives the impression, as Monty Python would say, of being a 'contractual obligation' book.

Written by Barbara Vine, alias Ruth Rendell, the story revolves around the London Underground. The focal character, Jarvis, owns a rambling former school in West Hampstead, conveniently situated between West Hampstead and Finchley Road tube stations, which he sublets to various tenants for a pittance. These tenants' lives are affected one way or the other by the Underground, and Jarvis, lives, breathes and eats Underground Railway systems.

His tenants include a classical violinist (who has just left her husband and newly born daughter), a flautist with an injured hand (who busks on the Underground with the violinist and subsequently falls in love with her), a falconer (who heads a vigilante patrol on the tubes), a single mother with two children by different fathers who receives maintenance from yet another man who thinks he is the father) and a man with a grudge against the Underground (who also falls in love with the violinist while at the same time becoming best mates with the flautist).

Meanwhile, the owner of the house, who is completely broke, heads off to Russia to spend a few months on various underground railway systems there!

The man with the grudge, ostensibly penniless, yet the owner of an Amex Gold Card, tries to blow up the Underground system control room, the violinist wants to go back to music college, the bird man's falcon becomes ill and the two children (a 7 year-old girl and her 9-year old brother who has a large panther tattoo between his shoulder blades) carry on deep conversations reminiscent of Dallas or Knots Landing. The young boy's hobby is 'sledging' (hanging on to the top of the tube train car) between stations.

Added to all the confusion, the young children's grandmother lives in a house nearby and regrets not having had a lesbian relationship with her best friend of 50 years.

The novel is written in a style which continually makes the reader refer back to the previous sentence to check what they have read, and frankly, the only redeeming feature is the wealth of true facts and figures about the London Underground scattered throughout the book's chapters.

A novel for masochists.

Star rating 1/5 (and then only for the Underground facts and figures).