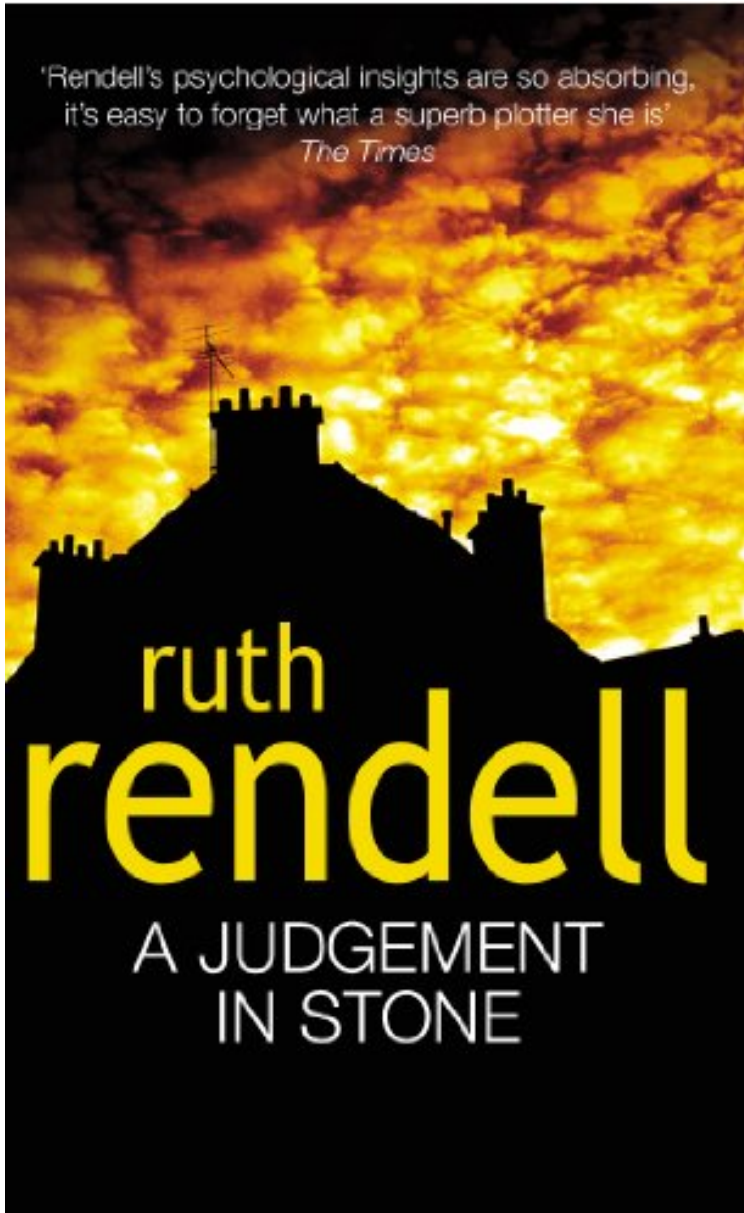


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A Judgement In Stone



Par Ruth Rendell
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Description : Description du produitWhat on earth could have provoked a modern day St. Valentine's Day massacre?On Valentine's Day, four members of the Coverdale family -- George, Jacqueline, Melinda and Giles -- were murdered in the space of 15 minutes. Their housekeeper, Eunice Parchman, shot them, one by one, in the blue light of a televised performance of Don Giovanni. When Detective Chief Superintendent William Vetch arrests Miss Parchman two weeks later, he discovers a second tragedy: the key to the Valentine's Day massacre hidden within a private humiliation Eunice Parchman has guarded all her life. A brilliant rendering of character, motive, and the heady discovery of truth, A Judgement in Stone is among Ruth Rendell's finest psychological thrillers.

Prsentation de l'diteurFour members of the Coverdale family - George, Jacqueline, Melinda and Giles - died in the space of fifteen minutes on the 14th February, St Valentine's Day. Eunice Parchman, the housekeeper, shot them down on a Sunday evening while they were watching opera on television. Two weeks later she was arrested for the crime. But the tragedy neither began nor ended there...Extrait1Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read or write. There was no real motive and no premeditation. No money was gained and no security. As a result of her crime, Eunice Parchman's disability was made known not to a mere family or a handful of villagers but to the whole country. She accomplished by it nothing but disaster for herself, and all along, somewhere in her strange mind, she knew she would accomplish nothing. And yet, although her companion and partner was mad, Eunice was not. She had the awful practical sanity of the atavistic ape disguised as twentieth-century woman. Literacy is one of the cornerstones of civilisation. To be illiterate is to be deformed. And the derision that was once directed at the physical freak may, perhaps more justly, descend upon the illiterate. If he or she can live a cautious life among the uneducated, all may be well, for in the country of the purblind the eyeless is not rejected. It was unfortunate for Eunice Parchman, and for them, that the people who employed her and in whose home she lived for ten months were peculiarly literate. Had they been a family of philistines, they might be alive today and Eunice free in her mysterious dark freedom of sensation and instinct and blank absence of the printed word. They belonged to the upper middle class and they lived a conventional upper-middle-class life in a country house. George Coverdale had a philosophy degree, but since the age of thirty he had been managing director of his late father's company, Tin Box Coverdale, at Stantwich in Suffolk. With his wife and his three children, Peter, Paula, and Melinda, he had occupied a large 1930-ish house on the outskirts of Stantwich until his wife died of cancer when Melinda was twelve. Two years later, at the wedding of Paula to Brian Caswall, George met Jacqueline Mont. She also had been married before, had divorced her husband for desertion, was then thirty-seven, and had been left with one son. George and Jacqueline fell in love more or less at first sight and were married three months later. George bought a manor house ten miles from Stantwich and went to live there with his bride, with Melinda, and with Giles Mont, Peter Coverdale having at that time been married for three years. When Eunice Parchman was engaged as their housekeeper George was fifty-seven and Jacqueline forty-two. They took an active part in the social life of the neighborhood, and in an unobtrusive way had slipped into playing the parts of the squire and his lady. Their marriage was idyllic and Jacqueline was popular with her stepchildren, Peter, a lecturer in political economy at a northern university, Paula, now herself a mother and living in London, and Melinda who, at twenty, was reading English at the University of Norfolk at Galwich. Her own son, Giles, aged seventeen, was still at school. Four members of this family George, Jacqueline, and Melinda Coverdale and Giles Mont died in the space of fifteen minutes on February 14, St. Valentine's Day. Eunice Parchman and the prosaically named Joan Smith shot them down on a Sunday evening while they were watching opera on television. Two weeks later Eunice was arrested for the crime because she could not read. But there was more to it than that. 2The gardens of Lowfield Hall are overgrown now and weeds push their way up through the gravel of the drive. One of the drawing-room windows, broken by a village boy, has been boarded up, and wisteria, killed by summer drought, hangs above the front door like an old dried net. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang. It has become a bleak house, fit nesting place for the birds that Dickens named Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach. Before Eunice came, before Eunice left and left desolation behind her, Lowfield Hall was not like this. It was as well kept as its distant neighbours, as comfortable, as warm, as elegant, and, seemingly, as much a sanctuary as they. Its inhabitants were safe and happy, and destined surely to lead long secure lives. But on an April day they invited Eunice in. A little blustery wind was blowing the daffodils in the orchard, waves on a golden sea. The clouds parted and closed again, so that at one moment it was winter in the garden and at the next an uneasy summer. And in those sombre intervals it might have been snow, not the blossom of the blackthorn, that whitened the hedge. Winter stopped at the windows. The sun brought in flashes of summer to match the pleasant warmth, and it was warm enough for Jacqueline Coverdale to sit down to breakfast in a short-sleeved dress. She was holding a letter in her hand, in her left hand on which she wore her platinum wedding ring and the diamond cluster George had given her on their engagement. "I'm not looking forward to this at all," she said. "More coffee, please, darling," said George. He loved watching her do things for him, as long as she didn't have to do too much. He loved just looking at her, so pretty, his Jacqueline, fair, slender, a Lizzie Siddal matured. Six years of marriage, and he hadn't got used to the wonder of it, the miracle that he had found her. "Sorry," he said.

"You're not looking forward to it? Well, we didn't get any other replies. Women aren't exactly queueing up to work for us." She shook her head, a quick pretty gesture. Her hair was very blonde, short and sleek. "We could try again. I know you'll say I'm silly, George, but I had a sort of absurd hope that we'd get well, someone like ourselves. At any rate, a reasonably educated person who was willing to take on domestic service for the sake of a nice home." "A lady, as they used to say." Jacqueline smiled in rather a shamefaced way. "Eva Baalham would write a better letter than this one. E. Parchman! What a way for a woman to sign her name!" "It was correct usage for the Victorians." "Maybe, but we're not Victorians. Oh dear, I wish we were. Imagine a smart parlourmaid waiting on us now, and a cook busy in the kitchen." And Giles, she thought but didn't say aloud, obliged to be well mannered and not to read at table. Had he heard any of this? Wasn't he the least bit interested? "No income tax," she said, "and no horrible new houses all over the countryside." "And no electricity either," said George, touching the radiator behind him, "or constant hot water, and perhaps Paula dying in childbirth." "I know." Jacqueline returned to her original tack. "But that letter, darling, and her bleak manner when she phoned. I just know she's going to be a vulgar lumpish creature who'll break the china and sweep the dust under the mats." "You can't know that, and it's hardly fair judging her by one letter. You want a housekeeper, not a secretary. Go and see her. You've fixed this interview, Paula's expecting you, and you'll only regret it if you let the chance go by. If she makes a bad impression on you, just tell her no, and then we'll think about trying again." The grandfather clock in the hall struck the first quarter after eight. George got up. "Come along now, Giles, I believe that clock's a few minutes slow." He kissed his wife. Very slowly Giles closed his copy of the Bhagavad Gita which had been propped against the marmalade pot, and with a kind of concentrated lethargy extended himself to his full, emaciated, bony height. Muttering under his breath something that might have been Greek or, for all she knew, Sanscrit, he let his mother kiss his spotty cheek. "Give my love to Paula," said George, and off they went in the white Mercedes, George to Tin Box Coverdale, Giles to the Magnus Wythen Foundation School. Silence settled upon them in the car after George, who tried, who was determined to keep on trying, had remarked that it was a very windy day. Giles said, "Mmm." As always, he resumed his reading. George thought, Please let this woman be all right, because I can't let Jackie keep on trying to run that enormous place, it's not fair. We shall have to move into a bungalow or something, and I don't want that, God forbid, so please let this E. Parchman be all right. There are six bedrooms in Lowfield Hall, a drawing room, a dining room, a morning room, three bathrooms, a kitchen, and what are known as usual offices. In this case, the usual offices were the back kitchen and the gun room. On that April morning the house wasn't exactly dirty but it wasn't clean either. There was a bluish film on all the thirty-three windows, and the film was decorated with fingerprints and finger smears. Eva Baalham's, and probably, even after two months, those of the last and most lamentable of all the au pairs. Jacqueline had worked it out once and estimated that six thousand square feet of carpet covered the floors. This, however, was fairly clean. Old Eva loved plying the vacuum cleaner while chatting about her relations. She used a duster too, up to eye level. It was just unfortunate that her eyes happened to be about four feet nine from the ground. Jacqueline put the breakfast things in the dishwasher, the milk and butter in the fridge. The fridge hadn't been defrosted for six weeks. Had the oven ever been cleaned? She went upstairs. It was awful, she ought to be ashamed of herself, she knew that, but her hand came away grey with dust from the banisters. The little bathroom, the one they called the children's bathroom, was in a hideous mess, Giles's latest acne remedy, a kind of green paste, caked all over the basin. She hadn't made the beds. Hastily she pulled the pink sheet, the blankets, the silk counterpane up over the six-foot-wide mattress she shared with George. Giles's bed could stay the way it ...

From Library Journal Published in 1976 and 1977, respectively, these are fairly typical of Rendell's popular psychological thrillers. Demon presents a researcher studying psychopathic personalities who doesn't recognize that his seemingly shy, harmless neighbor is a total nut job. Judgement finds a police investigator trying to discern why a housekeeper slaughters her employer's entire family on Valentine's Day. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.