



## The Dead Beat

*Doug Johnstone*

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**The Dead Beat** Doug Johnstone

*If you're so special, why aren't you dead?*

Meet Martha. It's the first day of her new job as intern at Edinburgh's *The Standard*. But all's not well at the ailing newspaper, and Martha is carrying some serious baggage of her own.

Put straight onto the obituary page, she takes a call from a former employee who seems to commit suicide while on the phone, something which echoes with her own troubled past.

Setting in motion a frantic race around modern-day Edinburgh, *The Dead Beat* traces Martha's desperate search for answers to the dark mystery of her parents' past. Soundtracked by and interspersed with a series of gigs from the alternative music scene of her parents' generation in the early '90s, Doug Johnstone's latest page-turner is a wild ride of a thriller, and a perfect follow-on to his #1 Kindle bestseller, *Hit & Run*.

## The Dead Beat Details

Date : Published May 1st 2014 by Faber & Faber (first published April 29th 2014)

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Author : Doug Johnstone

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## From Reader Review The Dead Beat for online ebook

### Ellen Skinner says

#### Interesting story

The Dead Beat has the potential to be a very depressing and overdone dark psychological tale. However, the author's skill held my interest until the depth of the story was revealed. At that point the book became a page turner for me, and I couldn't put it down.

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### Sarah says

4.5 stars.

Hit & Run is my favourite novel by this author so was over the moon to see Billy the main character from it pop up in this stand alone novel, The Dead Beat.

You don't have to have read Hit & Run but believe me you will want to as Billy's story well and truly gripped me. The Standard which is an Edinburgh newspaper is what links both books as Billy already works there and Martha has just started.

Right from the start it is obvious that Martha has a lot of issues and to be honest I felt even more sorry for her when her first day at the paper finds her working on the obituaries. Like her, I expected it to be a very boring job but after answering her very first phone call, well her whole world just seems to spiral out of control.

The authors books always make for quite a dark reading experience, with topics such as depression and mental health issues they certainly are not the lightest of reads yet they are so compelling. I literally can not get enough of them.

Every character in this novel is damaged in some way or another. They all seem to be fighting their own battles and demons. For most, what is in the past is better off staying there, but Martha is determined to delve into the past which drags up some shocking discoveries.

The Dead Beat is a compelling read that is steeped in darkness. It had me hooked all the way through and didn't disappoint. If you haven't read any of this authors books yet, you really should.

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### Nenette says

Another page-turner from this author. I like his very direct writing style, and his ability to keep the reader on edge, even if somehow one gets a bit of a clue already of what's going to happen.

The story is sort of a sequel to Hit and Run...I say 'sort of' because one will see what happens to Billy Blackmore, but the focus of the story is not on him at all, though he plays a big part. I like the character of Martha, and her almost forced consciousness of the workings of her brain and how her body is coping. She is one strong woman who knows her limitations and weaknesses yet doesn't balk at doing what she believes is

right.

It would be great to see more of the action/inaction at the Standard...could there be anything that is more exciting/frightening than that obit call Martha handled? Couldn't think of anything, but maybe Mr. Johnstone has wilder ideas? Maybe another follow-up novel, or is there one already and I just don't know about it?

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### **Paromjit says**

This is a story about family secrets, suicides, murder and mental health issues. I chose to read it because of its location, Edinburgh. And so it is, I now know which are the best possible choices to commit suicide in the city! Running through the novel is the alternative music scene presented in a retro manner through a cassette tape walkman.

Martha's father has recently committed suicide and she is beginning her first day as a trainee obituary writer. On her first day, she takes a call where the actual obituary writer phones in his own obituary and then shoots himself. This leads Martha to follow up a trail which leads to her own family. We find murder disguised as suicides. Martha's mother, Elaine, has her story interwoven in the tale.

The characters that inhabit this novel are superb from Martha who has electric shock treatment for her depression, to Cal, Billy, and V, the female wrestler. It was a superb read. However, not for the fainthearted.

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### **Fiona says**

An easy read, I liked the Edinburgh setting, but quite predictable.

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### **Paul says**

The Dead Beat moves to the beat

Bestselling author Doug Johnston has written yet another winner with The Dead Beat that is based around a student on work experience at The Standard newspaper in Edinburgh and is working the obits desk. This is a well written short thriller that builds to a crescendo at the end where no one word is wasted. Johnstone has weaved a delightful thriller with all the cops and robbers.

Martha Fluke has landed a job as an intern at The Standard in part due to her dearly departed estranged father Ian Lamb a former news editor at the paper. On her first day she is given the job of covering the obituary page as the editor is off sick. She takes a phone call from the obit editor who dictates his own obituary and then attempts to shoot himself while on the phone. This starts a chain reaction in which she starts to question what is happening around her.

She discovers her own father's obituary and the unedited version which informs her that she has an uncle who was her father's twin that she never knew about it. Her father was a twin just like she is with her brother Cal, she wonders if the mental health issues they have run in the family. As her life is unravelling around her she sets out to find out more about her mysterious uncle John and also find out why he was sentenced to a Mental Health hospital by the courts. Her search would mean finding out more about her family history with a

selection of gigs from the early 90s.

I enjoyed this thriller some of it for the nostalgic memories of various gigs of the early 90s. Also I like the way that mental health issues are handled with dignity and respect – where as there are some who would use this as an excuse to paint those with mental health issues as wide eyed loons. This was a refreshing and enjoyable thriller that builds slowly as you read and you enjoy the character development. A great read and a different aspect of Edinburgh.

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### **Fiona M says**

My current audio book. Love this treat listening to books in the car, even more so as it's free with the library service.

Really enjoyed this crime novel. Set in Edinburgh just after I got married so I could relate to many of the pubs and locations mentioned. And immediately could visualise it from the start which drew me in.

It's about a young student who starts work experience at the Standard (Evening News in disguise) which is the paper that her dad worked in all his life until he committed suicide two weeks before. Her first day at the office you don't envy. Working on the obituary desk she takes a call from the obituary editor who recites his own obituary before killing himself with a gun.

I've enjoyed all the Doug Johnstone books I've read but think this one is my favourite so far. It was quite a story.

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### **Raven says**

I must confess that after the slight disappointment of *Gone Again*, Johnstone's previous book, he is completely back on song again with *The Dead Beat*, a thought provoking and emotive thriller set in Edinburgh. With the backdrop of a failing local newspaper, Johnstone not only reprises the character of reporter, Billy Blackmore (*Hit and Run*) but brings to our attention, Martha, whose first day on the paper as the obituary writer, proves eventful to say the least, setting in motion a whole series of events that resonate strongly with both the here and now, and echoing back to the early 1990's...

Following the recent suicide of her father, himself the former news editor at *The Standard*, Martha is embarking on a work experience placement at the paper. She takes a call from the former obituary writer, and during the course of it, he appears to commit suicide. Naturally, she and her colleague Billy become intimately involved with these events, and soon the investigation begins to encroach heavily on the dark secrets of Martha's family background. Not only does Johnstone weave a compelling thriller from those initial events, which I will not reveal more details of, but with the theme of mysterious suicides looming large throughout, takes the opportunity to present the reader with an entirely more meditative study of death, the breakdown of families and how the events of the past can so insidiously impact on the present. The real strength of the book, for me, lies in the slow unveiling of the dark and twisted past of Martha's family through the flashbacks to the early days of her parent's relationship. Johnstone focuses on how this relationship fostered such an atmosphere of resentment and hatred, resulting in her mother's current emotional instability, her father's suicide and the murderous role of another in the fragmentation of Martha's life, which impacts so heavily on her life now. The writing is emotive and tinged with poignancy, as past events are gradually revealed, with Martha becoming one of the most empathetic characters I have encountered in crime fiction, in her role as a young woman progressively trying to improve herself from troubled beginnings, and seeking to find her place in a world so polluted by the actions of those closest to

her. Along with Martha, there are other stand-out characters, not only the reappearance of fellow reporter Billy, with his own interesting past, whose relationship with Martha is both endearing and protective, but also their spiky and ballsy colleague at the newspaper, V, and Martha's colourful brother Cal.

The other enjoyable aspect of this book, which it has to be said is quite sombre in tone, is Johnstone's interspersing of references to particular music and bands, so influential in Martha's parents' fledgling relationship, and which keep Martha connected with the spirit of her father following his suicide. Indeed, during the period of reading this book, I felt compelled to revisit my old vinyl collection, for some of the bands mentioned and have even discovered a couple of new ones, which added further to my enjoyment of The Dead Beat. So, overall a bit of a hit with me all round, providing a reading experience that went far beyond the average thriller, and that did give me pause for thought with the larger issues and emotions that the book contained. Excellent.

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### **Elaine says**

Not as good as the other two of this author I have read - Hit and Run and Smokeheads.

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### **Don says**

My first Doug Johnstone audio novel and a worthwhile listen/read at that. I have stated several times that the narrator can make or break an audio book and in this case it is the former.

Set in Scotland, the narrator's Scottish accents are wonderful to listen to, although they may make a true Scot cringe.

The plot maybe stretched a tad. After all it is unlikely to see a work experience staff member writing obituaries on her first day on the job at the local newspaper. However, most of my favourite fiction authors, or books, have plots which are way over the top...but still entertaining. And I found this one to be just that. Entertaining.

However, in a newspaper office is where the book began and there was enough in the first few paragraphs to whet my appetite. The story line developed well combining mental illness, depression, suicide, murders and extramarital affairs to create an interesting read.

Normally, mental illness, and depression are not topics high on my list of 'must reads'. However, in this case each was not overdone, and therefore, not a detailed description of each characters illness was included.

I have rate The Dead Beat as a three star read on Goodreads. If the option was available I would have added a half star.

Definitely, a nice quick read.

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### **Joanne says**

The Dead Beat by local author Doug Johnstone was a fast paced and gripping thriller. It's about Martha, doing journalistic work experience on The Standard newspaper in Edinburgh. If you know Edinburgh at all you'll know exactly what newspaper the author really means! On her first day she's is working at the obituary desk when she receives a call from someone who apparently commits suicide while on the phone to her. This leads to Martha and colleague Billy (who featured in Hit and Run which I also enjoyed) rushing to try to save the man's life. They then get caught up in all kinds of events which, it soon becomes apparent, are linked to long kept secrets in Martha's family. As with all of Doug Johnstone's books, there are plenty of twists and lots of action. Edinburgh was depicted brilliantly with a fair bit of the story taking place in my side of the city and so very well known to me. The very beautiful front cover is relevant to the story - again if you know Edinburgh you'll recognise the bridge and probably know what occasionally happens there. A very eventful, fast moving race against time through the streets of Edinburgh and a highly enjoyable read.

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### **Brandon Nagel says**

Everything Johnstone writes is excellent. This was an emotive thought provoking ride. Makes you think about life and death, happiness and sadness. This is my third book by Johnstone and I cannot wait to see what he comes up with next. Highly recommended.

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### **David Nelson says**

It felt pretty natural to compare this to Rankin, but in retrospect that's probably unfair. It starts with a guy dying in Edinburgh, yeah, but it's not a police procedural. I had to shake that idea off of myself pretty hard.

Yes... I enjoyed it, but it also kind of frustrated me. The chapters are all REALLY short, and maybe that's not really a bad thing, but it sort of breaks the flow a bit and that, and some other flaws, makes the writing feel a little bit amateurish. It's not as accomplished as Rankin (shit, done it again) and everything feels a bit... simple. Like the relationships between the characters are presented with no effort whatsoever - they meet, and are instantly amazing friends, because they are relevant to the plot.

The other huge flaw for me was the pacing. The blurb uses the phrases "dark mystery" and "wild ride of a thriller" but these elements of the story only begin to present themselves about 150 pages in. This isn't that unreasonable until you realise that there's only 100 pages left to go. I was ENJOYING the build-up, but it just felt like as soon as it actually got going it stopped. It wraps everything up, and tells the story (more or less) fully, but it just doesn't really exist as a "thriller" for very long.

That said, I did enjoy a lot of the themes of the book. Its got a lot of really authentic references to the alternative music scene of the 90's, including some pretty cool nods to the Edinburgh scene in particular, which I could really relate to. I've since learned that Doug Johnstone is also a musician signed to King Creosote's label, so this isn't really surprising. (Although it did annoy me that the early 20's main character was so totally ignorant of the bands she was 'discovering' - this isn't too far removed from your generation, hen). There's also some relatable stuff with mental illness, and of course the authentic backdrop of Edinburgh, so there were a lot of special little Easter eggs for me in here. I wonder how much this would appeal to people without these points of reference though.

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## Nigel Bird says

‘No one ever rages against the dying of the light.’ Billy Blackmore

Martha struggles with life. Her depression is a factor in all she does, so it seems rather fitting that, when she turns up for her first day at work at The Standard, she’s given a stand-in post covering the obituaries (the dead beat of the title). There’s not a great deal to learn and what she needs to know will be passed on by V, a confident American woman wrestler who happens to know just about all the ropes and all the ins and outs of the people who work at the paper.

As chance would have it, Martha happens to be on the desk when the actual obit writer calls in. It’s no ordinary call, however. In fact it’s so far out of the ordinary that it’s literally mind-blowing. The man at the other end of the line is calling in his suicide. The gun goes off and the call ends.

It’s in Martha’s blood to go and see if there’s anything she can do for the victim and also to follow a story, so she flies out of the office with one Billy Blackmore (of ‘Hit And Run’) to find out what the hell’s going on. To explain further, her investigative genes come from her journalist father, himself a recent suicide who took his life by jumping from North Bridge above Edinburgh’s Waverley Station.

At first glance, the mess that greets the pair in the obit writer’s home suggests little, but Martha can’t leave it alone.

What follows is the uncovering of the remarkable story of her family history, the darkness of which explains just why it’s been kept a secret for so long.

It would be difficult to talk about the plot without giving away key information, so I’ll pass on that.

What I can do is run down some of the aspects of it to explain why I enjoyed the read so much.

The present-day story is told from the point-of-view of Martha. It’s a treat to get to know her and to get to see some of the labyrinth of her mind. She has spirit and energy in spades. Her teenage angst and rebellion have just the right weight. Her patterns of thinking in terms of her depression are well handled and her inability to fully control her urges makes her a joy to get to know.

The pace of the story builds perfectly. The author gives out the pieces of the jigsaw at perfect moments, and even when most of them have been collected, the appetite created to understand the ‘why?’ and the ‘how?’ mean that the desire to get the full picture is constantly heightened. This full picture is only fully revealed right at the end, which means it’s a wild snowball ride all the way to the final pages.

All of the characters are extremely well drawn, including those who are only minor.

Alongside Martha’s adventure, there’s another very enjoyable strand to the book. Johnstone cleverly indicates the change of period to 1991 through the use of gig tickets, including to some rather amazing events that actually took place in Edinburgh and Glasgow at the time. This story tells the story of Martha’s mum, Elaine, and gives the explanation of the events that are unfolding and unravelling in the present day. This is told with strong insight and, for anyone who was ever into live music and enjoyed the indie-scene, this other dimension will provide a real treat.

Among other things, this change in time periods shows some of the huge contrast between the technologies of then and now (‘In a time before her [Martha]...when news was printed on paper. As foreign to her as the Stone Age.’). It also allows for some exploration of the generation gap, the young ones looking at their

parents as older, more sedentary beings rather than as people who once had their own formative years and may well have out-rebelled and out-done their children into the bargain.

This is intelligent, gripping, thoughtful fiction that demonstrates how a thriller can be so much more than a clinical dot-to-dot. Not only will have you racing to the end, it'll give you plenty of food for thought along the way.

I was very fortunate indeed to be sent a review copy of 'The Dead Beat', because having loved the novel 'Hit And Run' I'd have been buying a copy on the day of release. If you haven't been quite so lucky, I'd urge you to get yourself one and give yourself a mighty fine read. Soon as.

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### **John Travers says**

like any Doug Johnstone book, exactly the same highs and lows. Whilst Iain Banks and Irvine Welsh were also capable of writing some of the best and worst books around, at least the best books and worst books were different books. With Johnstone every book is both excellent and atrocious.

with Doug Johnstone you know you are going to get:  
an interesting and original setting and plot  
fantastically crafted characters that you really buy into and feel you really know.

but...

a daft scooby doo like greek tragedy ending, the unmasking of the 'baddy', the scuffle or gun pointing at the end, with the baddy dying and the goodies escaping luckily.

this ones no different. in fact I thought this one the best ive read so far, maybe its after 5 similarly enthralling/annoying books im becoming less annoyed about the endings. but just imagine how great Johnstone could be if he had an editor with balls who could send each manuscript back with the last 10 percent scored out and orders to work on a proper original ending.

p.s. one thing didn't make sense to me. well two, but they are connected.  
(view spoiler)

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