

EDGAR AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
OF *ACID ROW*

# MINNETTE WALTERS

THE

SCOLD'S

BRIDLE

"A splendid mystery...compulsively readable."

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## *The Scold's Bridle*

Minette Walters

St. Martin's Press (2010)

Rating: \*\*\*\*

Tags: Fiction, Mystery & Detective, Detective, Fiction - Mystery, Suspense, Mystery, Traditional British, Mystery & Detective - Traditional British

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# **The Scold's Bridle**

## by Minette Walters

"**Scold** *skold*, n. a rude clamorous woman or other."

*Chambers English Dictionary*

"**Branks** *brangks*, (Scot.) n.pl., rarely in sing., a scold's bridle; an instrument of punishment used in the case of scolds, etc., consisting of a kind of iron framework to enclose the head, having a sharp metal gag or bit which entered the mouth and restrained the tongue."

*Oxford English Dictionary*

"Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!  
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;  
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;  
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits  
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel  
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!"

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

"Forty-two!" yelled Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"

"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never really known what the question is ... Once you know what the question is, you'll know what the answer means."

Douglas Adams, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

*I wonder if I should keep these diaries under lock and key. Jenny Spede has disturbed them again and it's annoying me. She must have opened a volume inadvertently while dusting, and reads them now out of some sort of prurient curiosity. What does she make, I wonder, of an old woman, deformed by arthritis, stripping naked for a young man? A vicarious lust, I am sure, for it beggars belief that anyone other than her brute of a husband has ever regarded her with anything but revulsion.*

*But, no, it can't be Jenny. She's too lazy to clean so thoroughly and too stupid to find anything I say or do either interesting or amusing. The*

*later volumes seem to be attracting the most attention but, at the moment, I can't see why. I am only interested in beginnings for there is so much hope at the beginning. The end has no merit except to demonstrate how badly that hope was misplaced.*

*"In the dead vast and middle of the night ... How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable seem to me all the uses of this world."*

*Who then? James? Or am I going senile and imagining things? Yesterday I found Howard's offer open on my desk, but I could have sworn I put it back in the file. "O judgement, thou art fled..."*

*The pills worry me more. Ten is such a round number to be missing. I fear Joanna is up to her wretched tricks again, worse, I wonder if Ruth is going the same way. Blood will always out...*

**\*1\***

Dr. Sarah Blakeney stood beside the bath and wondered how death could ever be described as a victory. There was no triumph here, no lingering sense that Mathilda had abandoned her earthly shell for something better, no hint even that she had found peace. The dead, unlike the sleeping, offered no hope of a re-awakening. "You want my honest opinion?" she said slowly, in answer to the policeman's question. "Then no, Mathilda Gillespie is the last person I'd have expected to kill herself."

They stared at the grotesque figure, stiff and cold in the brackish water. Nettles and Michaelmas daisies sprouted from the awful contraption that caged the bloodless face, its rusted metal bit clamping the dead tongue still in the gaping mouth. A scattering of petals, curling and decayed, clung to the scraggy shoulders and the sides of the bath, while a brown sludge below the water's surface suggested more petals, waterlogged and sunk. On the floor lay a bloodied Stanley knife, apparently dropped by the nerveless fingers that dangled above it. It was reminiscent of Marat in *his* bath, but so much uglier and so much sadder. Poor Mathilda, thought Sarah, how she would have hated this.

The police Sergeant gestured at the pitiful grey head. "What in God's name is *that* thing?" His voice grated with repugnance.

Sarah waited a moment until she felt her own voice was under control. "It's a scold's bridle," she told him, "a primitive instrument of repression. They

were used in the Middle Ages to curb the tongues of nagging women. It's been in Mathilda's family for years. I know it looks awful like that, but she kept it downstairs in the hall over a pot of geraniums. As a decoration it was rather effective." She raised a hand to her mouth in distress and the policeman patted her shoulder awkwardly. "They were white geraniums and they poked their heads through the iron framework. Her coronet weeds, she always called them." She cleared her throat. "She was rather fine, you know. Very proud, very snobbish, very intolerant and not overly friendly, but she had a brilliant mind for someone who had never been trained to do anything more than keep house and she had a wonderful sense of humour. Dry and incisive."

"Coronet weeds." echoed the pathologist thoughtfully. "As in:

"There with fantastic garlands did she come,  
Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:  
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds'

"*Hamlet*," he explained apologetically to the policeman. "Ophelia's end. I had to learn it for O level. Amazing what you remember as you get older." He stared at the bath. "Did Mrs. Gillespie know *Hamlet*?"

Sarah nodded unhappily. "She told me once that her entire education was based on learning chunks of Shakespeare by heart."

"Well, we're not going to learn much by standing staring at the poor woman," said the policeman abruptly. "Unless Ophelia was murdered."

Dr. Cameron shook his head. "Death by drowning," he said thoughtfully, "while of unsound mind." He glanced at Sarah. "Was Mrs. Gillespie depressed at all?"

"If she was, she never gave any indication of it."

The policeman, decidedly more uncomfortable in the presence of death than either of the two doctors, ushered Sarah on to the landing. "Many thanks for your time, Dr. Blakeney. I'm sorry we had to subject you to that but as her GP you probably knew her better than most." It was his turn to sigh. "They're always the worst. Old people, living alone. Society's rejects."

Sometimes it's weeks before they're found." His mouth turned down in a curve of distaste. "Very unpleasant. I suppose we're lucky she was found so quickly. Less than forty hours according to Dr. Cameron. Midnight Saturday, he estimates."

Sarah leant her back against the wall and stared across the landing towards Mathilda's bedroom where the open door showed the old oak bed piled high with pillows. There was a strange sense of ownership still, as if her possessions retained the presence that her flesh had lost. "She wasn't that old," she protested mildly. "Sixty-five, no more. These days that's nothing."

"She looks older," he said matter-of-factly, "but then she would, I suppose, with all the blood drained out of her." He consulted his notebook. "A daughter, you say, living in London, and you think a granddaughter at boarding school."

"Don't Mr. and Mrs. Spede know?" She had caught a glimpse of them in the library as she came in, grey faces curiously blank from shock, hands clasped tightly together like petrified children. "They've been coming in twice a week for years. He looks after the garden and she cleans. They must know more about her than anyone."

He nodded. "Unfortunately we've had nothing but hysterics out of them since Mrs. Spede found the body. We'll be asking round the village, anyway." He looked towards the bedroom. "There's an empty bottle of barbiturates on her bedside table beside the remains of a glass of whisky. It looks like a belt and braces job. Whisky for courage, sleeping pills, then the Stanley knife in the bath. Do you still say you wouldn't have expected her to kill herself?"

"Oh, lord, I don't know." Sarah ran a worried hand through her short dark hair. "I wouldn't have prescribed barbiturates if I thought there was a chance she'd abuse them, but one can never be certain about these things. And anyway, Mathilda had been taking them for years, they were commonly prescribed once. So yes, I would rule out suicide from what I knew of her, but we had a doctor-patient relationship. She had severe pain with her arthritis and there were nights when she couldn't sleep." She frowned. "In any case, there can't have been many of the sleeping pills left. She was due for another prescription this week."

"Perhaps she was hoarding them," he said unemotionally. "Did she ever open her heart to you?"

"I doubt she opened her heart to anyone. She wasn't the type. She was a very private person." She shrugged. "And I've only known her what? twelve months. I live in Long Upton, not here in Fontwell, so I haven't come across her socially either." She shook her head. "There's nothing in her records to suggest a depressive personality. But the trouble is" She fell silent.

"The trouble is what, Dr. Blakeney?"

"The trouble is we talked about freedom the last time I saw her, and she said freedom is an illusion. There's no such thing in modern society. She quoted Rousseau at me, the famous rebel-cry of students in the sixties: 'Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains.' There was only one freedom left, according to Mathilda, and that was the freedom to choose how and when to die." Her face looked bleak. "But we had conversations like that every time I saw her. There was no reason to assume that one was any different."

"When was this conversation?"

Sarah sighed heavily. "Three weeks ago during my last monthly visit. And the awful thing is, I laughed. Even that wasn't a freedom any more, I said, because doctors are so damn scared of prosecution they wouldn't dream of giving a patient the choice."

The policeman, a large detective nearing retirement, placed a comforting hand on her arm. "There now, it's nothing to fret about. It was slitting her wrists that killed her, not barbiturates. And the chances are we're looking at murder anyway." He shook his head. "I've seen a few suicides one way and another, but I've yet to see an old woman turn herself into a flower arrangement in her bath. It'll be money that's behind it. We all live too long and the young get desperate." He spoke with feeling, Sarah thought.

An hour later, Dr. Cameron was more sceptical. "If she didn't do it herself," he said, "you'll have the devil's own job proving it." They had removed the body from the bath and lain it, still with the scold's bridle in place, on plastic sheeting on the floor. "Apart from the incisions on her wrists there's not a mark on her, bar what one would expect, of course." He pointed to the lividity above and around the wrinkled buttocks. "Some postmortem hypostasis where the blood has settled but no bruising. Poor old thing. She didn't put up any sort of a fight."