

**"Harm Done" by Ruth Rendell,
Crown, \$24, 346 pages.**

By MICHAEL GILTZ

It's a busy time for Chief Inspector Wexford in the latest mystery from the prolific but dependable Ruth Rendell.

A teenage girl disappears for a few days, then returns home apparently unharmed, but refuses to say what happened to her. The same thing occurs with another girl the next week. Meanwhile, an elderly pedophile is released from

prison, stirring up a firestorm of protest in his community.

When the youngest child of a wealthy family is abducted, the pedophile's rioting neighbors are certain he's the cause. But the pedophile had a penchant

Ruth Rendell



HARM DONE

An Inspector Wexford Mystery

for little boys, while the kidnapped baby is a girl.

Is the kidnapping connected to the missing teens?

No, according to a policeman, who lays that hypothesis to rest. As for the missing baby,

Wexford's own daughter, Sylvia, may have the clue to that mystery.

Sylvia, who works at a home for battered women, takes one look at the mother of the stolen baby and states that the child isn't the only victim: It's obvious to Sylvia that the woman is an abused spouse.

Rendell's book isn't for those who like to collect clues and puzzle out the solution before the answer is revealed. In "Harm Done," the pleasure comes in the details.

Both Wexford and Sylvia know that she was never his favorite, and their awkward attempts at reconciliation are touching — even as Rendell makes clear they're both to blame for the distance between them.

Rendell is also good at depicting the petty gossip and innuendo that turn neighbors into an angry mob. She has no problem finding fault with everyone, serving as a moral voice in a world where almost no one wants to listen.