

THRILLERS

Guess the ending – and it can't be PC

Jake Kerridge admires a provocative courtroom drama about a rape case



TAKE IT BACK
by *Kia Abdullah*

382pp, HQ,
£12.99, ebook £5.99
★★★★★

Sexual assault is overtaking murder as the fashionable felony in crime fiction. There have been several excellent thrillers in recent years highlighting the ways in which the odds in rape trials are stacked against women, and I've learnt a great deal from them.

But, with a degree of shame, I must admit that they don't always satisfy that part of me that reads crime fiction to play "guess the twist". You know that, however much the story suggests along the way that the female victim is lying, she will be vindicated in the end.

The journalist Kia Abdullah has cunningly boxed herself in with this courtroom thriller in which no politically correct ending is possible. Jodie, a 16-year-old white girl with a genetic condition that has left her horribly deformed, claims to have been the victim of a gang rape carried out by a group of her classmates, all Muslim boys. One of those scenarios the tabloids are always warning us about must be true: either a lonely girl has

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invented an assault to get attention, or she is the prey of predatory immigrants. Whatever the outcome, the trial will serve to boost those who want to sow discord between Britain's native and immigrant communities.

The story is mostly told from the perspective of Jodie's assault adviser Zara Kaleel, a steely but sometimes flaky Muslim woman who has walked out on both an arranged marriage and a high-flying career as a barrister to help vulnerable people. Abdullah avoids pious stereotypes in her characterisations (apart from the smarmy, posh defence barrister) and writes particularly well about Jodie's difficult relationship with her hope-deprived, working-class mother ("The only thing you could do was surrender and Jodie's resoluteness made her livid. You couldn't stand up to life.") This is a thought-provoking and sparkingly intelligent novel, with the welcome bonus of an unguessable ending.

