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08/15/2005 Fiction

★ **Thirteen Steps Down**

**Ruth Rendell** . Crown \$25 (352p) ISBN 1-4000-9842-4

British veteran Rendell (*The Rottweiler*) delivers the best novel she's written in years, featuring elderly Gwendolen Chawcer and her younger tenant-in-the-attic, "Mix" Cellini. The unlikely housemates share St. Blaise House, Chawcer's rotting London mansion, full of many generations of dead insects and past dreams of upper-middle-class glory. Both Chawcer and Cellini are looking for love in all the wrong places. Boozy, delusional Cellini—who earns his keep fixing fitness equipment and is a "fan" of real-life murderer Harold Christie—obsesses about supermodel Nerissa Nash. He'll do anything to snag her attention and assume his "rightful" place as her husband. The Miss Havisham-like Chawcer pines for Dr. Stephen Reeves, whom she last saw when he attended her dying mother in 1953. Cellini spins out of control first, killing a clingy, "unworthy" date, then hiding her beneath the floorboards in his apartment. Rendell exhibits all her trademark virtues: vivid characters, a plot addictive as crack and a sense of place unequaled in crime fiction. *Agent, Peter Matson at Sterling Lord Literistic* . (Oct.)

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**P Is for Paranormal--Still**

There's no new way to say it, except possibly en français, the language of love. Paranormal is le dernier cri in the romance category--its hold on readers and publishers alike defies any logic or explanation. In its first year it was a phase, then it became a definite trend. Now, it's a sea change, with no evidence that the tide's waning. So, sure, everybody agrees about the Pword, but what, exactly, is its appeal-- why is this romance genre so, er, bloody popular?

**Lake Isle Celebrates 20 Years**

In the late 1990s, Hiroko Kiffner had been running her small, New York City publishing house, Lake Isle Press, for about 10 years producing a small number of cookbooks, including *Contemporary One-Dish Meals* and *Low Fat Living for Real People*, each of which sold around 40,000 copies. When she got a call from a would-be author in upstate New York who wanted to write a cookbook and publish it in three months, she was skeptical. Yet something about the writer convinced her, and in 1998, Lake Isle published Rachael Ray's *30-Minute Meals*. It sold more than 800,000 copies and is still in print today.