

Last night's televis on

RUPERT HAWKSLEY



Bone-chilling Stephen King adaptation leads us astray with gusto

» **The Outsider** Sky Atlantic, 9pm ★★★★★

» **Catching A Killer: A Diary From The Grave** Channel 4, 9pm ★★★★★

The opening four-minute sequence of **The Outsider**, HBO's gritty, 10-part adaptation of Stephen King's 2018 novel, will haunt you in the early hours. An elderly gentleman is walking his dog in Georgia as the late afternoon light begins to fade. The dog stops to sniff the wheel of a white van and the camera lingers just long enough for us to glimpse a splash of blood on the paintwork.

After entering the woods, the dog breaks free and is found panting in front of the mutilated body of a young boy. When Detective Ralph Anderson (Ben Mendelsohn) arrives at the scene, he is told that there are teeth impressions around some of the wounds. "Animal?" he asks. "No."

It was an assured, unsettling introduction – dark and cold as a winter lake. But what seemed like the gruesome set-up for a protracted murder investigation was undermined minutes later. We were shown what was, surely, irrefutable evidence that local teacher Terry Maitland (Jason Bateman) was responsible. A woman had seen Maitland pick the boy up in the white van; a young girl had bumped into him, his mouth and clothes covered in blood.

Things got stranger still, though, when video footage emerged, which proved that Maitland was at a teachers' conference in a different state that day. This being

Stephen King, it was no great surprise to discover that something otherworldly might be at play.

Bateman, who also directed the opening two episodes, slightly overplayed his hand in framing Maitland as the killer. So compelling was the evidence presented to the viewer, we knew it could not possibly be him. It helped a bit that the police were sceptical, particularly when Maitland looked straight at a CCTV camera, as if trying to get caught – even so, the red herring was just a bit too fishy to bother with.

But there were impressive performances from Mendelsohn as the furious detective, scarcely able to control himself, and Bill Camp as Maitland's barrelling lawyer. Throw in a bone-chilling string score and spooked children seeing things behind the curtains and you can be sure that *The Outsider* will be living inside your head for longer than you would like.

Catching A Killer: A Diary From The Grave was a meticulous, 90-minute account of how police

discovered that Ben Field, a trainee vicar, had murdered 69-year-old Peter Farquhar in the Buckinghamshire village of Maids Moreton in 2015 and benefited from his will. It was different from most true-crime documentaries: police had few forensics to work with, since the murder investigation was opened only in 2017 when another elderly person associated with Field died unexpectedly. As a result, much of the evidence was circumstantial or drawn from Farquhar's extensive diaries.

And the pace was slower, too – lots of time was dedicated to exploring and celebrating Farquhar's life. He was a respected English teacher and a beloved brother. Hearing Farquhar's diaries read out was deeply upsetting, though. A lonely man, who had struggled to accept his sexuality, Farquhar thought that, in Field, he had found a companion late in life. "I can't believe that this has happened," he wrote. "Ben can love me." In fact, Field was slowly poisoning Farquhar with barbiturates.

Unnecessary, though, was the access we were given to parts of the investigation, such as Farquhar's exhumed remains being picked over by pathologists, a bit of his



hair and a thumbnail dropped into evidence bags. What, really, was the point in showing us this?

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Jason Bateman directed HBO's 'The Outsider', in which Ben Mendelsohn (above) stars as Ralph Anderson. HBO

