

## ***Take My Life*, screen and page**

More often than not, when a good book is filmed the result disappoints because so much, necessarily, is left out. The viewer is served the bare bones of the reader's meat. In the case of WG, think of *Fortune is a Woman* (1952), *Marnie* (1961) or *The Walking Stick* (1967) – all engaging novels (which is why filmmakers essay them in the first place) but mediocre films (with *The Walking Stick* arguably the best of the three). In the case of *Take My Life*, however, we don't have this problem because the original story was written specifically for the screen, with no cutting, tailoring, compression or adaptation of prior work involved. Given that it was WG's first experience of writing for the cinema, he made an impressive job of it.<sup>1</sup> What's more, UK critics not only liked the film:

*Take My Life ... tries to say something about life, about people rather than corpses, and so contrives to be endearing ... A very creditable film. (Geoffrey Bell, Spectator)*

*What a good film this is! How I enjoyed it! (Helen Fletcher, Sunday Graphic)*

*That rare article, a credible thriller. At once unpretentious and brilliant. (Manchester Guardian)*

but went out of their way to compliment its author:

*Most intelligently written. (Alan Dent, News Chronicle)*

*The dialogue must have been a pleasure for the actors to speak. (Catherine de la Roche on the BBC)*

*Unusually literate and worth listening to. (Punch)*

*[The cast] show by their acting their appreciation of dialogue which sounds, and is, natural ... Altogether, a good story ... very well told. (Times)*

However, the film's reception by the American trade press was somewhat cooler:

*There's nothing to differentiate [Take My Life] from an ordinary potboiler. Attempts to create an arty atmosphere – narrative and flashbacks – merely result in making it tiresome ... Greta Gynt, who has made much progress recently, is disappointing. The camera and the costumer have been unkind to her, and there's small scope for real acting. Hugh Williams as her husband has little to do but exhibit a crooked smile. (Variety, 14 May 1947)*

*The action ... unfolds with a minimum of excitement [and] the solution, as a matter of fact the entire story, depends heavily upon coincidents that are hard to believe. (Harrison's Reports, 1948)*

*The thick British accents ... may prove obstacles to some. (Motion Picture Daily, 10 February 1948)*

*Lack of names that mean money at the American box office is the chief charge to be brought against this Cineguild Production ... which compares very favourably with the best American suspense pictures on all other counts. (Motion Picture Herald, 21 February 1948)*

Nor was the *New York Times* (19 January 1949) effusive:

*Winston Graham ... did not write with the camera in mind and since director Ronald Neame apparently was not able to break through the static barriers set up by the script, Take My Life slowly succumbs to inertia ... The picture has good production qualities (but) just doesn't move as a movie should and, as a result of all talk and no action, the excitement inherent in the story is not successfully translated into pictorial terms.*

With the film in production, WG decided (or perhaps was persuaded) to develop his screenplay into a novel and we can see in the process a reversal of the book-to-film reduction method bemoaned above. (Nonetheless, it is no coincidence that the resultant work is one of the author's shortest.)

Rather, existing but previously anonymous characters are given names (prosecuting counsel Sir Arthur Wells K.C., defence counsel Mr. Stephen Tyler K.C., police surgeon Doctor Frederick, trial judge Mr. Justice Ferguson, Nick's sister Joan Newcombe, which explains why Philippa chose "Newcombe" as her alias in Scotland) and back-stories (Philippa, Nick, Elizabeth) and voices (Frobisher the solicitor; Rusman's landlord and landlady Mike and Maggie Grieve, Nick's brother-in-law John Newcombe). Locations – Bow Street Police Station, Brixton Remand Prison, the Old Bailey – are identified, giving the reader a satisfyingly grounded experience which the viewer is denied. The film's modest cast is expanded to include Doctor David Wishart and his wife Janet and husband and wife the MacArdles, who both receive forged letters supposedly written by Rusman after her death; music mistress Harriet Wharton appears, as do Dolgelly landlady Catherine Evans, Rusman's fellow lodger Jonah Hartley, Penmair hotelier Mrs Drummond and even, briefly, Selby-born Bob the stoker.

The novel was not widely reviewed. Anthony Boucher of the *New York Times* dismissed the American edition, without notice, as "foolishness" (16 July 1967) – though others, both at home and abroad, found more to say:

*Fictional versions of successful films – usually described as "the book of the film" – as a rule appeal mainly to the traveller who has to buy something quickly at a railway bookstall. Here is the exception. This would have been a first-class thriller even if it had not first been a first-class film. Probably the reason for that is that the author of the thriller was also responsible for the film scenario. (Manchester Evening News, 3 January 1948)*

*The English "thriller" at its best – competent, carefully written, exciting without being hysterical. (Adelaide Advertiser, 21 February 1948)*

*Even for those who saw the film it is ... diverting reading. (Truth, 9 January 1949)*

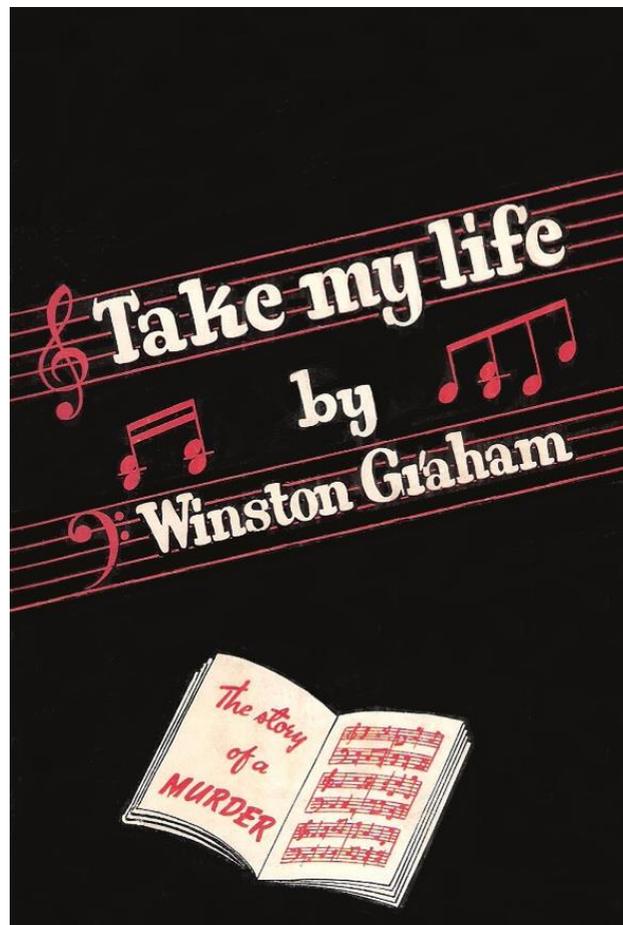
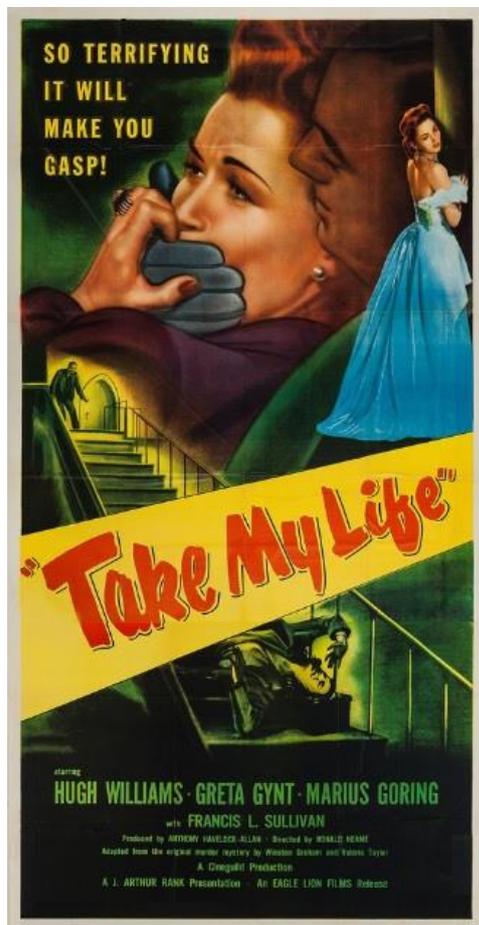
*Take My Life lacks much of the mounting terror and psychological twists of some of [Graham's] other novels. However,*

*it is an enjoyable tale about interesting people and although holding no great elements of surprise, is thoroughly readable. (Rosalie M. Raphael, Delta Democrat-Times, 15 January 1967)*

*[Take My Life] was made from a screenplay ... and doubtless its conciseness owes something to this transmutation, but there is no sense of artificiality, the dialogue is selectively pertinent and the plot develops naturally, without a straining of probability, if one allows for war and post-war conditions ... A well fashioned thriller. (Launceston Examiner, 11 September 1948)*

*This murder story ... culminates in a confession delicately described ... The plot is excellent. (Hull Daily Mail, 24 January 1948)*

So, how do film and book compare?



The film is well-made, well-acted and barrels along in entertaining fashion, but when it's over and you stop to think about what you've just seen, not much of the final ten minutes makes any sense. For how is it that Hawkins, the "deaf" detective, is on the train back from Edinburgh with Philippa? It can only be because the police have been shadowing her movements all through her trip to Scotland which, at least during the Penmair part, is hard to swallow. Hawkins sits in her compartment reading all the way from Edinburgh to York then retakes his seat soon after York when Philippa is alone with Fleming. He tells them he cannot hear what they say and, after confirming that this is apparently true, Fleming confesses in his presence to Elizabeth's murder, *after which the detective (who has heard everything) gets up and leaves*. Should he not have arrested Fleming there and then? Or, at the very least, have returned immediately with a guard and done so? (To be fair, he does return within two minutes, but by himself.) Leaving a vulnerable woman alone with a murderer might make for better cinema (and, indeed, it is not long before he has her, clinging on for dear life, half out of the carriage door) but it is hardly responsible or credible behaviour. Later, Philippa is surprised in Archer's office to learn who Hawkins really is – but surely, once the threat of Fleming was removed, he would have told her on the train to relieve her distress? WG's acute author's sensibility must have picked up on this, because, in the book, Hawkins is written out and the story's conclusion revised<sup>2</sup> – yet the new ending is problematic also. In the film, Fleming dies, as blackguards should – but, in the book, we are asked to believe that Philippa is able to persuade him to leave the train at King's Cross, walk into the nearest police station and voluntarily turn himself in simply because it is the right thing to do and, at heart, he is a moral, decent, God-fearing chap. But he isn't – he's a vile murderer! Thus one barely credible if exciting conclusion is replaced by another rather more tame but equally unsatisfactory one.

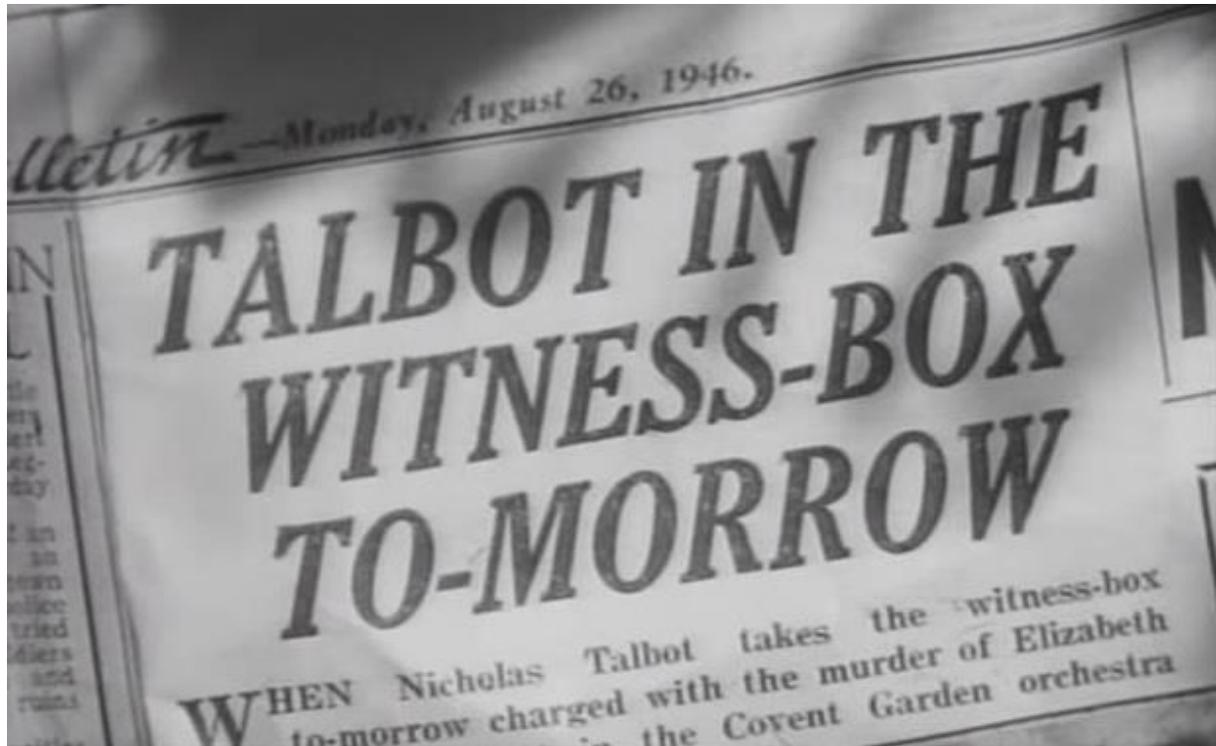
WG uses the greater space and leisure of the book to stretch himself, most obviously by giving much more of the trial, which lends itself naturally to dramatic exposition (all his trials grip – find others in *The Merciless Ladies*, *Ross Poldark*, *Jeremy Poldark*, *After the Act* and *The Tumbled House*), but also by expanding on Philippa's visit to Penmair (village and school). A number of telling details are added to the story: we are told, for instance, how Fleming discovered where Rusman lived (by following her home from the theatre, but then how did he know she was performing at the

theatre?); regarding Grieve's damning identification of Nick in the line-up, it is suggested, quite plausibly, that he saw Talbot's photo in the locket either when Archer opened it in his presence or at some time before that – either could have happened. We are told that, whilst living in Penmair, Elizabeth consulted Doctor Wishart exhibiting "a few bruises", indicating that, prior to her death, she had been the victim of physical abuse at the hands of the "good ... Christian" Fleming. Only in the book does she keep two old letters from Nick in her violin case. Only in the book do we learn that she only ever took up with Fleming in the first place because of his close physical resemblance to Nick, whom she never stopped loving. The book makes plain as the film does not that, in order to further Nick's cause, Philippa consciously withdraws from her operatic career just at the moment of her breakthrough, so willingly staking her future prospects against his. The book holds back the reveal of the photo in the locket until Archer's first meeting with Nick, which works more effectively than giving it away earlier, as does the film, in Rusman's room. The book pointedly declines to describe Rusman's murder – the reader is led up to it and then on from it, but, to the author's credit, the voyeuristic opportunity of witnessing the crime itself is not exploited. Elizabeth is moved down-market, from 216 Rathlan Mansions to 46 Lofton Street and the opera in which Philippa appears at the book's opening is not "new" but merely *Madame Butterfly*.

In the film, Philippa's exposure of Fleming puts a stop to her husband's trial and so removes from him the threat of a death sentence if convicted; in the book, by the time the train has reached London the trial is over with Nick not guilty, so, less dramatically, her ordeal doesn't save his life – the jury's verdict does that – although it does serve to clear all taint of suspicion from his name and bring to justice the true perpetrator of a heinous crime.

The film makes one chronological error. When Fleming is shown at home reading a newspaper report of the previous day's court proceedings, we see the shot below of the page in question. Note the date at the top. It's of interest in confirming that the film's action takes place in 1946, but Talbot goes into the witness-box on a Friday (we know this because the next day Philippa goes to stay with Joan for the week-end before rushing off to Scotland) so "Monday" cannot possibly be right. Another minor point: when Fleming leans forward on the train to confess his crime, his well-lit

face fills the screen (second image below) – but where is the scar left by the wound inflicted by his wife during her death-struggle? It would have been a nice touch to have added it, just faintly.



So, book or film? The film is more fun and brims over with brio. It set out to entertain and surely succeeds. The book, more reflective, more sober and serious, does its job too, though is less likely to stay long in the mind. Perhaps simply because it was first conceived as a film, it's in that medium that *Take My Life*, for all its flaws, works best. Audiences lapped it up in 1947 and there's no reason, especially now that the passing years have added "period-piece" lustre, why they shouldn't still.

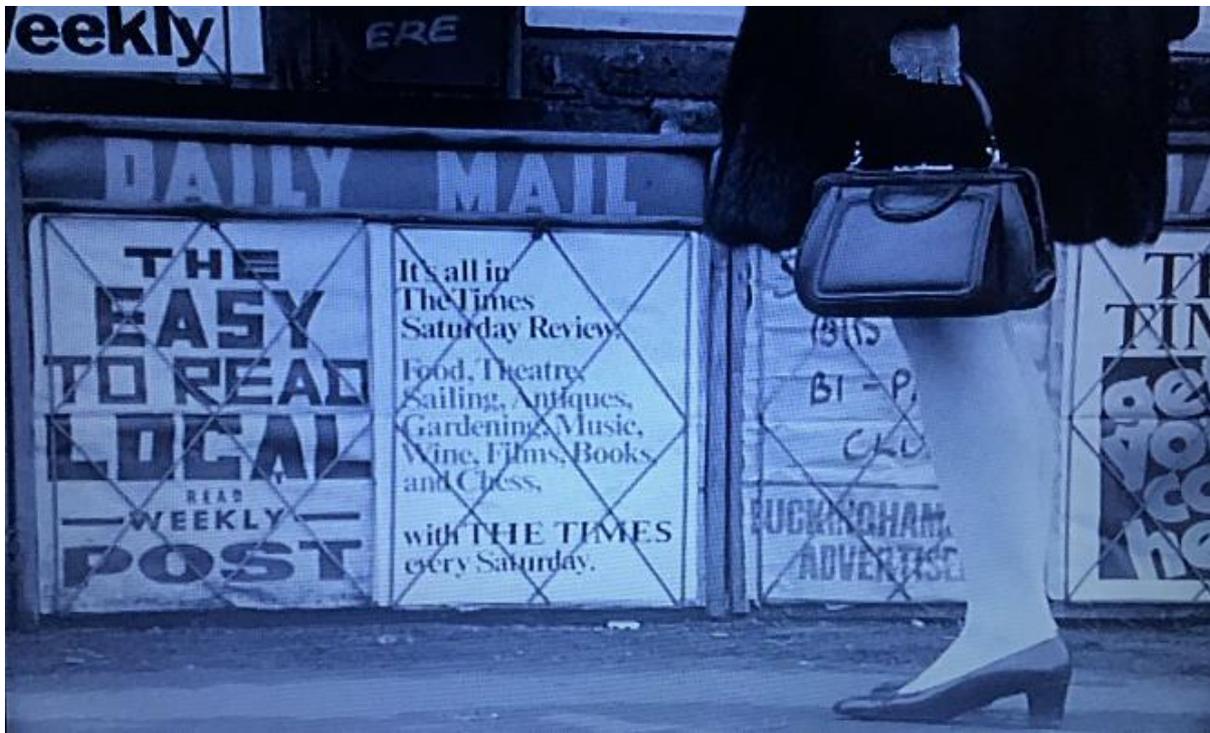
### **Mord nach der Oper**

In case two iterations of WG's tale were not enough, in 1969, German speakers were offered a third<sup>4</sup>: on 8 May of that year, a 91-minute small-screen version of *Take My Life* appeared on German television channel WDF, with concurrent and /or subsequent screenings in Belgium, Hungary, Switzerland and probably elsewhere. Titled *Mord nach der Oper (Murder after the Opera)*<sup>5</sup>, the lead roles were taken by Monika Peitsch (Philippa Shelley), Johannes Grossmann (Nick Talbot), Paul Albert Krumm (Sidney Fleming) and Gitty Djamal (Margret Ruzman); the director was Michael Braun and the writer/producer Helmut Pigge.

Monika Peitsch – a slightly built, physically unpersuasive opera singer – is said to have practised the arias from *La Traviata* and *Force of Destiny* for weeks in a Munich hotel, reportedly disturbing other guests' sleep. The on-screen singing was done by Mariza Alemao, a Mexican diva from Salzburg's State Theatre, but Peitsch still had to "perform" (particularly lip-sync) persuasively enough to convince the viewer,<sup>6</sup> which she does. Pigge, who turned to writing after a war-wound frustrated his wish to act, chalked up fifty-two teleplay credits over a screenwriting career spanning thirty-five years (to 1990).

The film is set in Great Britain (London and Buckinghamshire posing as Scotland) in the then present day, with virtually no attempt to disguise locations – what's more, all of WG's original character names are retained such that we see "Angus Baird" in his shop stocked with PG Tips, Zubes, Marmite, Heinz Sponge Pudding, Carnation Milk and Andrews Liver Salts conversing in fluent German, which seems quite odd. The newspapers on sale are all standard English-language editions of British titles – when she arrives in "Penmair", Philippa fingers a "Scottish Daily Express" to remind

viewers where she supposedly is – but then promptly walks past a shop display advertising the *Daily Mail*, *Times* and *Buckinghamshire Advertiser*, which probably wouldn't sell well north of the border.<sup>7</sup>



So, does *Mord nach der Oper* follow book or film? The closing on-screen writing credit reads: *Fernsehfilm von Helmut Pigge nach der Roman TAKE MY LIFE von Winston Graham und Valerie Taylor* [A TV movie by Helmut Pigge from the novel TAKE MY LIFE by Winston Graham and Valerie Taylor] which is confusing since WG alone wrote the novel whilst author and actress supposedly collaborated over the film. And Pigge's script does indeed steer the middle course this ambiguity suggests, combining elements of both previous forms whilst failing to improve on either.

Up to Philippa's discovery of the mystery tune in Ruzman's belongings, the plot is unchanged. But then, other than unproductive visits to the Royal College of Music, some record stores and the conductor of her opera company, none of whom can help, Philippa makes no effort to investigate the dead woman's past; rather, she and we sit through lengthy courtroom exchanges until, at last, the Bungy Baker break sends her hurrying, in blonde wig and glasses, to the station. Events then follow film and book until she finds herself back on the train with the incriminating photo in her handbag and Fleming, pulling down the blinds, intent on murder.



Monika Peitsch (Philippa) and Paul Albert Krumm (Fleming)



Johannes Grossmann (Nick – note the scar on his forehead) and Gitty Djamal (Margret Ruzman)

The supposedly deaf detective makes a token appearance then departs after which Fleming, rather than cutting up rough, quickly loses his nerve and decides to end it all. Having been restrained from doing so, on arrival in London, he is turned over to the police and driven off in handcuffs to meet his fate. Philippa's appearance in the courtroom with the damning photo as the judge sums up is enough to end the trial. Smiles all round.

A review from 2011 comments favourably on the music of Bert Grund and the "exterior shots, filmed in the British Isles, which give the film a particularly beautiful thriller feel"; it concludes: "the ninety-one minutes go by pretty quickly and leave a positive impression."<sup>8</sup> *Mord nach der Oper* might play better to German-speakers than a non-native audience, but, on the evidence of the visuals alone, the lack of investigation of Ruzman's past and a poor showing from the wimpish Fleming leave this one wanting – a bit too earnest; a thriller that doesn't thrill. The high-octane excitement of the original screen version is sadly missed. Yes, its ending could stand some minor tweaking, but much here is lost and too little gained. In short, *Take My Life's* iteration of choice remains Ronald Neame's 1947 WG-scripted film.

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Though the film's writing credits are shared between WG, Valerie Taylor and Margaret Kennedy, I am assuming that most of the work was actually done by Graham.

<sup>2</sup> WG drafted at least three *Take My Life* scripts – the first ends, as the novel, with Fleming turning himself in and the second and third with his death, so WG didn't so much revise the cinematic ending as revert to his original choice. For more, see [LIFE + STARS](#), pages 59-63.

<sup>3</sup> The first two draft scripts referred to in the previous note reveal how Grieve was able to identify Nick in the police line-up even though he'd never seen him before. Though each participant had a supposedly identical dressing taped to his forehead, Grieve noticed that only Nick's was stained at its edge with iodine, showing it to be a *real* dressing

covering a *real* wound – a simple but subtle point made in neither film nor novel.

<sup>4</sup> The 1947 film was screened in Germany as *Das Rettende Lied* (*The Saving Song*) and the novel published as *Die zweite Geige stirbt* (*The Second Fiddle Dies*).

<sup>5</sup> In 1949, Viennese publisher Hiro launched a series called *Der Kriminalroman der Woche* (*Crime Novel of the Week*); volume 850, issued in 1972 (later re-issued as volume 1579) was *Mord nach der Oper* by Frank J. Xavier. However, the 66-page "Commissioner Wilton" story is *not* an adaptation of either Helmut Pigge's TV production of the same name or WG's *Take My Life*.

<sup>6, 8</sup> [krimiserien.heimat.eu](http://krimiserien.heimat.eu)



<sup>7</sup> Another indicator that we are not in Scotland is the pub sign above, which shows a swan with a chain-encumbered coronet around its neck – a distinctive heraldic device peculiar to Buckinghamshire. If you choose to film in Bucks, why not set "Penmair" there? Indeed, with a German director leading a German cast and crew, why not – since the "where" of the story is surely immaterial – set the whole thing in Germany? To have deliberately and unnecessarily not done so seems perverse.