

Crowner John Rides Again

Enthusiasts for Bernard Knight's 'Crowner John' series, will be glad to hear that the seventh volume has now appeared. In *Fear in the Forest* (Simon & Schuster, £17.99) we have reached June 1195, and Devon's first coroner, Sir John de Wolfe, is as busy as ever, this time dealing with a series of murders and mysterious attacks within an area of royal forest on the edge of Dartmoor. The tale begins dramatically, when a panicked mare gallops into the tiny village of Sigsford, dragging her rider by one stirrup, dead from an arrow in his back. Once more Sir John's investigations are complicated by disputes over jurisdiction, since the royal forests – not so much woodlands as the king's hunting preserves, covering almost a third of England – came under the direct authority of the king and were governed by a separate system of Forest Law, enforced by its own courts. Once more too, Sir John gradually uncovers a great deal of questionable activity in which his brother-in-law, Sheriff Richard de Revelle, is intimately involved. And, as usual, his relationships with the two leading women in his life are in a state of tension. Nesta, his mistress, is pregnant, and a good deal less enthusiastic about the coming birth than Sir John. On hearing this unwelcome news, his wife, Matilda, withdraws in fury to the nearby convent of Polsloe. For a brief period it seems possible that she will take the veil, but things seldom happen so conveniently.

Again Bernard Knight has produced a well-researched and clearly written volume, which gives a realistic flavour of its period, and as usual there is mud and fighting aplenty.

Ann Lyon