

The New York Times

Crime

By Marilyn Stasio

Short of robbing a bank, an established genre author can't make a bolder midcareer move than trying out a hero in a prospective series. Justin Scott takes the plunge in *HARDSCAPE* (Viking, \$19.95) and comes up with an amateur sleuth named Benjamin Abbott 3d, an easy-to-take charmer with a bright future.

Despite his high principles ("I wasn't a liar") and scrupulous manners (he stakes his aunt's delphiniums and woos the ladies by brewing tea), this Connecticut Yankee has his quirks. Before taking over his family's flagging real estate business in the colonial town of Newbury, Ben was a Wall Street raider who did hard time in Leavenworth for insider trading. Reflecting, no doubt, a gap in his rehabilitation, the flawed hero accepts \$5,000 to take video footage of a rich man's wife cavorting with her lover. Ben ditches the job when his moral code belatedly kicks in, but he can't shake his guilt when the lover is murdered or when his own favorite cousin is killed in what might be a related crime.

Mr. Scott's clean, succinct style smooths the way for a tight plot, lean dialogue and neat characterizations of the people who live on both sides of Newbury's social tracks. Best of all, there's Ben, a likable guy of sound mind and decent character, but with a shrewd sense of his limitations. In a field of fiction overrun with middle-aged boys and girls at play, let's call him an unreconstructed grown-up.