



Author's Book Group



meets Val McDermid

WORDS **LORAIN PATRICK**

Earlier this year Val McDermid was honoured with an outstanding contribution to Crime Fiction award. Previous winners of the prestigious title, given at the Theakstons Harrogate Crime Writing Festival, include Ruth Rendell, P.D. James and Reginald Hill. The Scots writer is up there with the best but a more down to earth woman you couldn't wish to meet.

Nowadays the Kirkcaldy born author splits her time between Edinburgh and Cheshire but she remembers fondly her time in Glasgow's West End in the 1970s. 'I worked for the Daily Record and lived near the

Botanics. I loved it – it was my first job in national newspapers and it was lots of fun. It was a very male environment, there were only three female reporters on the newspaper at that time and we were never allowed to be on the same shift at the same time, just in case there would be a "woman's story" needing covering!

'There was a real romance to journalism then – the clatter of typewriters and smoky newsrooms. It had only been allowed the previous year that women could wear trousers in the office and work the night shift.'

Despite the nostalgia there were tough elements to the job. 'You had to prove yourself,' Val says. 'The very first day on the job I was sent to get photographs of four teenagers who had died the night before in a car crash. It was called the death knock – it was a real baptism of fire.'

Val's first book was published in 1987 and *Out of Bounds*, her new book, the fourth to feature Detective Chief Inspector Karen Pirie, is book number thirty. Every January she sits down to pen her next tale.

'I try and keep the first three months of the year relatively free of events,' says Val. And the starting point is almost always something she has seen or heard. 'I get to thinking if that had happened rather than this, or if they believed him not her, or if you turn that story round and look at it from the other end of the telescope how would that be? It's always these things that intrigue me.'

'Over time I will start to explore the possibility of that as a story and once the shape of a story starts to emerge I can start to think whose story it is. Often it can be years before a story takes shape and makes sense. But so far every year come January there has been a book ready to roll.'

The seeds of *Out of Bounds* were planted a few years ago when Val attended a forensic science conference in London. She picks up, 'One of the papers I listened to was presented by two detectives from Greater Manchester talking about how they had developed familial DNA as a way of cracking cold cases.'

'It used to be you only got a direct hit with an exact DNA match but now there is a facility to get what's called a familial hit, so they can plug DNA into the data base and it goes ping – a close male relative of yours murdered someone in 1973.'

'There have been some serious cases that have been resolved this way. On the face of it it looks straightforward but nowadays we have complicated family relationships and sometimes things are not as straightforward as they seem.'

'So I thought how could I take that information and twist it into something more interesting for a narrative, and I started thinking of families, connections and relationships that are not what they seem to be.'

Out of Bounds deals with the impact of violent crime years after the media have forgotten the story. There is even a mention of Byres Road in the book when Karen Pirie goes to interview a witness who runs a hairdressing salon there. Even more authentically, Val picks up, 'Someone is sent out to Kember and Jones for a loaf of bread and Liz the hair salon owner likes to tell her clients you could open a bookshop stocked only with the publications of people who live in the G12 postcode!'

There is a lovely dedication to Val's literary agent Jane Gregory in the book. 'I had a shocking deal at the beginning. But Jane got my books out into new markets. That made the difference between surviving and not surviving when I started writing full-time.'

In today's publishing world, it is much harder to get started. 'I wouldn't have a career now based on the start of my career. Nowadays if you have not made the bestseller list by your third book they are turfing you out with the rubbish. It's very tough out there.'

Val is modest about her immense success, having sold over 11 million books to date and been translated into 30 languages. She has really put Scottish crime writing on the map.

Val laughs, 'I have no idea what people in China make of me writing about Scotland or the north of England. And my Chinese publishers are called the Elegant People Publishing house, so clearly they haven't seen any photographs!'

For authors book group Val recommends three books that have left her with a sense of wonder. 'If you are not reading you are not a writer!' she exclaims. 'That's where you learn your craft. As a reader I am interested in books that draw me into their world.'

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Book 1 –
Laidlaw
by William McIlvanney



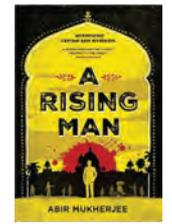
Laidlaw is the first novel in a series of crime books by William McIlvanney. Considered the first tartan noir book when it was published in 1977 it marked a complete departure in style for the writer. Val picks up, ‘Before *Laidlaw* we didn’t really have a tradition of Scottish crime writing. I think it is no coincidence that the book came out at a time when we started talking about the first Scottish devolution referendum. We had begun to ask ourselves what it means to be Scottish in the modern world, who we are and what kind of nation we aspire to be.

‘Literature and the arts have explored these questions over the last forty years and McIlvanney did it in the form of a crime novel. It was such an exciting read for me. Although I had read English crime novels in the 60s and 70s there hadn’t been anything like that in Scottish fiction and it was written the way people actually spoke. It was a revelation you could write this kind of book and it would be respected in literature.’

McIlvanney managed to layer street language with a kind of poetic writing and the book has both a sense of realism and high-end prose. ‘You knew you were in hands of someone special. He changed the face of Scottish crime writing. It’s always the case in any step forward somebody has to make a first move. William McIlvanney opened the door a crack. Ian Rankin and I pushed it open a wee bit more. Then we got swamped by the tsunami coming up behind us!’

Val concludes, ‘It’s really become one of the key areas where we have explored what it is to be Scottish at this time in history. The crime novel is perfectly suited to telling the story as you have access to all areas: your victim’s workmates and family; the witnesses; the investigators; the media. You can make your social sweep as wide or as narrow as you want. The possibilities are endless. It’s a very exciting time to be writing crime fiction.’

Book 2 –
A Rising Man
by Abir Mukherjee



This debut novel is set in Calcutta in 1919 and centres round Captain Sam Wyndham, a former Scotland Yard detective who arrives in the city seeking a fresh start after the Great War.

With barely a moment to acclimatise to his new life, Wyndham is caught up in a murder investigation that takes him into the dark underbelly of the British Raj.

Abir secured a book deal by winning the Harvill Secker/Daily Telegraph crime writing competition and for Val, who reads around seventy new books a year for the New Blood panel, this book immediately jumped out as a fresh new voice.

‘It’s a terrific book,’ says Val. ‘The central character has come through the war so has all the survivor guilt of that and a problem with opium. We all come to a colonial novel of that era thinking we know what we will get. That is not the case with this book.’

Abir explores the effect of colonisation on the governing people as much as the governed and attitudes are not what you would expect. Val picks up, ‘There are some real inversions – Captain Sam Wyndham is much more supportive of the Indians than his Indian sidekick, who is more supportive of the Empire. You get these attitudes you are not expecting and the book keeps wrong footing you along the way.

‘It is also really well written,’ Val continues. ‘It takes you into a world that none of us directly have any experience of. Abir has done his research and it feels authentic. The smells, tastes, sights and sounds are really brought to life. This is not a book just for someone who is interested in India or colonial history, the characters almost jump off the page.’



Book 3 - **Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal** by Jeanette Winterson

The title of the book is the real life question asked by Jeanette's adopted mother, the fearsome Mrs Winterson, when Jeanette is thrown out of her house at age sixteen for taking up with her second girlfriend.

Published in 2011 it's a candid account of Jeanette's grim childhood with her adopted parents and her eventual search for her birth mother. Some literary critics describe it as the best book ever written about the cost of growing up.

For Val it's a brave and honest memoir. 'It does not paint Jeanette in a good light, it's quite challenging and funny and has great energy.'

'Jeanette carved a line through her life and says there are twenty years in the middle of her life she misses out in the book because they are not relevant to the story. That's a really courageous thing to do. She is a terrific writer and is really coming into her stride.'

'It is a great read for anyone. You don't have to share Jeanette's experiences to be engaged in this story. Because she is a write of fiction she draws characters with great vividness so you get this terrifying picture of the evangelical Mrs Winterson with her gun on the bedside table.'

Val sums up, 'Ultimately it's a really uplifting memoir because the place where Jeanette ends up is a lot better than the places she visits along the way. The year it came out my reading year was bookended by two very fine memoirs, one from Jackie Kay (*Red Dust Road*) and Jeanette's at the end of the year. Which is unusual for me as I don't really read many memoirs.'

As we finish I wonder if there is a memoir in Val? 'I am not sure I have a very interesting past,' she says. 'There is not enough trauma and I had a very happy childhood - what were my parents thinking!'

Val McDermid's new book *Out of Bounds*, published by Little Brown, is out now.

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Val McDermid
Out of Bounds

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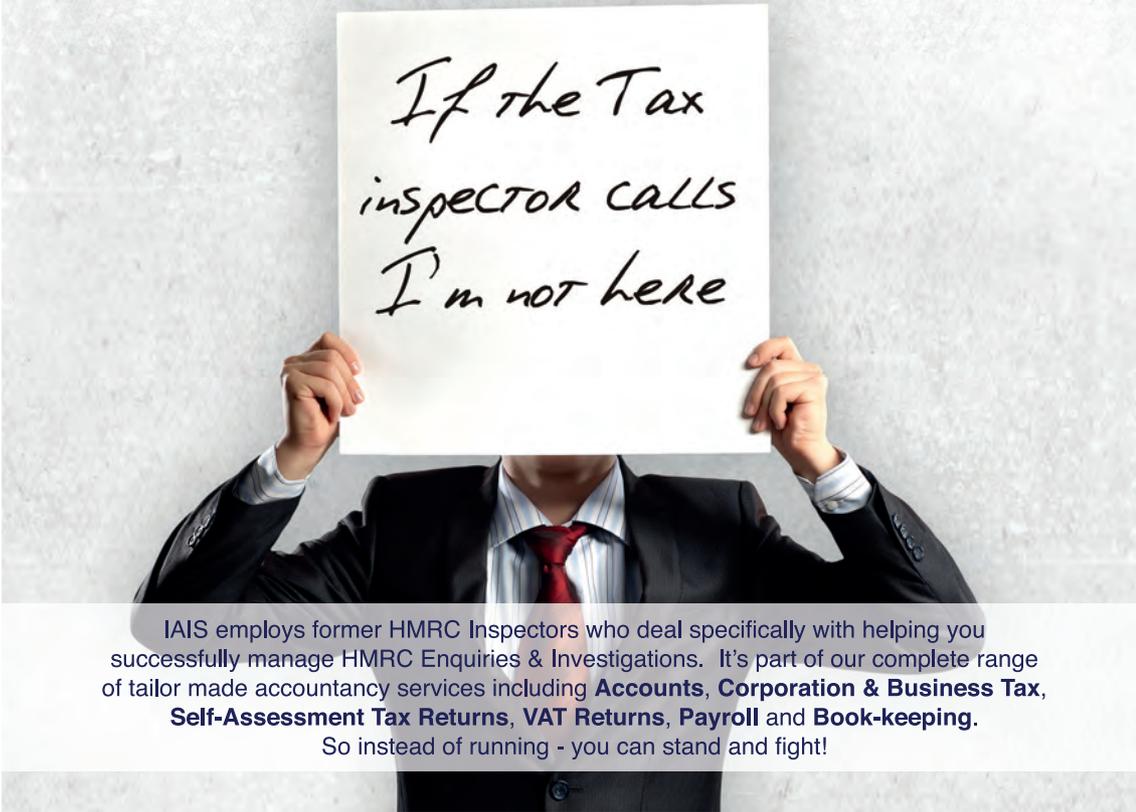
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