

Ad loading...

[Arts and Culture](#) > [Edinburgh Festivals](#)

Val McDermid: 'I'm not very good with authority'

Val McDermid's new heroine was inspired by her experiences as a young journalist in print media's messy, misogynistic heyday

By [David Robinson](#)

Wednesday, 11th August 2021, 8:33 pm



Val McDermid

It's book launch No 35 for [Val McDermid](#) at the Edinburgh International Book Festival next week, and by now you might have thought she'd be a wee bit blasé about the whole business. Not a bit of it. She's more anxious about the new book than any she's written for almost 30 years.

1992). When I wrote my first Tony Hill/Carol Jordan novel (the series adapted for TV as *Wire in the Blood*) I thought that was going to be a standalone novel too, and it was the same when I wrote my first Karen Pirie (*The Distant Echo*, 2009; a six-hour adaptation has just been commissioned by ITV). So it's been quite daunting sitting down writing something that I know is going to be a series and I'm more anxious about it than anything I have written for a long time."

Hello, this is the first of your 5 free articles for this week

From just £3 per month you can get unlimited access and 70% fewer ads

Subscribe today

Already subscribed? [Log in here](#)

The new book is called *1979*, after the year in which it is set. And the 'big concept' is that next year she'll be back with *1989*, and so on right up to *2019* - each book starring her new central character, journalist Allie Burns, each book charting how Scotland itself has changed - and not just the media, social attitudes, politics too. And, of course, crime.

"When you start a new series, the central character has to be appealing to you, and in turn you have to sow enough seeds in the first book to develop in further instalments. I wanted Allie to be tough enough to survive in journalism, although she may not always remain a journalist, and come out still standing. I wanted her to be gallus, but also have vulnerabilities."

Advertisement

It won't be the first time McDermid has chosen a female journalist as her central protagonist, and she was working as one herself when she wrote her first novel, *Report for Murder*, in 1987. Its heroine, Lindsay Gordon, then had her own series and McDermid worked on the second and third books in it before quitting journalism to write full-time. So who is more like her - Lindsay or Allie? "Lindsay is more

brash, Allie more thoughtful. Neither are really like me, although obviously we have some of the same characteristics. The writer NJ Cooper has a good phrase about this - 'less than

Like her creator, Allie Burns is a working-class feminist Fifer who went to Oxbridge, and worked one a thinly disguised Daily Record as the 1970s ended. That underlay of real-life experience matters: 1979 reeks of inky, *Life on Mars*-style authenticity, right down to off-the-scale sexist attitudes to women reporters. Examples abound in the novel, though I prefer one McDermid mentions one from real life: when she asked her boss to hire a talented woman from another paper, he looked at her with incredulity. “But we’ve already got a woman!” he said.

“I went into journalism,” she says, “because I foolishly thought we could change things. I’m not very good with hierarchy and authority and I get bored very quickly, so it seemed to be the only thing that would suit me. But I grew up in a household that took the Record and I believed that working people should have newspapers that were informed, entertaining, and did investigative journalism too.

“Of course, I couldn’t change how newspapers work, or stop the dive to the common denominator and the obsession with soap stars. When I was in Manchester [where she moved in 1979 for a job on the People] I remember sitting outside the door of a *Coronation Street* star at six o’clock in the morning waiting to see who came out, and thinking, ‘This is no way to earn a living.’” Looking round at colleagues 20 years older, she realised that she didn’t want to end up like them, but how could she avoid it? Certainly there was no escape tunnel via the quality press: as Allie Burns herself is told, “Once a tabloid hack, always a tabloid hack.”

Advertisement

The contrast between McDermid then and now is amazing. Instead of being stymied, she is positively flourishing. Just look at what she does as well as being Queen of Crime: frontwoman of the Funlovin’ Crime Writers, editor (with her partner Jo Sharp) of book of ideas for a better Scotland, writer of graphic novel out this month (see panel). Then there’s her commitment to the Harrogate Crime

Festival (which she co-founded), the visiting professorship in New Zealand, countless appearances on radio and TV, the lockdown *Cooking the Books* videos, and so, so much more.

She says she’s worried about launching her new book, but there’s no need. 1979 is a fast-paced triple whammy of a thriller, with all three plots, each credible, running simultaneously. It uses all the crime writing skills she has honed over the years, and adds

1970s heyday. Allie Burns is off to a flying start, and well worth following down the decades.

1979, by Val McDermid, is published by Little, Brown, price £20. Val McDermid will be [talking about it at the Edinburgh International Book Festival](#) on Thursday 19 August at 2:30pm. www.edbookfest.co.uk

Graphic novels at EIBF, from Alison Bechdel to Val McDermid

Advertisement

With her angular haircut and glasses, American cartoonist and lesbian icon Alison Bechdel likes to joke that she's so easy to draw that she's almost a cartoon anyway. But what lights up her latest graphic memoir, *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* (Vintage, £16.99), is her search for what drives her lifelong passion for exercise. Whatever that is - mortality, addiction, self-sabotage, endorphin highs - is

surely so elusive and invisible that you'd have thought a graphic artist would have a hard time getting it down on paper.

If you think that, though, you've clearly not read either of Bechdel's previous best-selling graphic memoirs, the first of which, *Fun Home*, has already been turned into a multi-award-winning Broadway musical. (It is also in the process of being made into a film starring Jake Gyllenhaal as Bechdel's gay dad, who ran a small Pennsylvanian funeral home before committing suicide in 1980.)

Although dutifully retracing all the various exercise fads that have obsessed her since then, Bechdel's new book is really about a search for enlightenment and self-knowledge that ropes in Kerouac, Emerson, Wordsworth and the Buddha along with lorryloads of self-mockery in a multi-layered book that is both wildly witty and deeply wise.

Line of Duty writer Jed Mercurio is one of those people who already seem to have led three completely different lives. Not only has he been a doctor, but he's flown jets too, and has always been fascinated by crash landings. There's one in *Sleeper* (Scribner UK, £16.99), the graphic novel he has co-written with actor, writer and director Prasanna Puwanarajah (a fellow doctor and sci-fi nut), when in 2378 a biologically enhanced robot lawman crash-lands on Titan, the second-largest moon of Saturn, after a mysterious explosion in space.

Advertisement

This retro-futurist story, hand-inked by the

graphic novel after being turned down as a TV drama and aims to take the Western into an era when deep-space travel is a reality and Titan has become strategically important as an energy source. In his search to find out what caused the deadly explosion, robot lawman

DS-5 has some advantages, but he was due to be decommissioned, and his powers are fading fast ... They will be even weaker in subsequent books, as he finds out more about his own past and the dark, starry world he's landed in, but it's an impressive debut.

Then again, so is *Resistance* (Wellcome Collection, £18.99), stylishly illustrated by American graphic novelist Kathryn Briggs and based on a three-part dystopian radio drama written by Val McDermid. In it, a mystery bug makes scores of people attending a Northumberland rock festival fall ill. Worse still, the antibiotics they're given no longer seem to work. The plague spreads, mutates, more and more people die, and there doesn't seem to be anything that can stop it before it kills not just millions, but billions of us.

The shocking thing about all of this, the then Chief Medical Officer Sally Davies told McDermid, is that this scenario is entirely plausible. "No new antibiotics have been developed for about 40 years and we don't even completely understand how penicillin works," says McDermid. "So it is likely to happen in the foreseeable future. The plague is coming, and we will not have the treatment for it as we have broken down our last line of defence."

Alison Bechdel: Monday 23 August, 2.30pm; Jed Mercurio & Prasanna Puwanarajah/Val McDermid, Monday 16 August, 8.30pm.

Advertisement

DAVID ROBINSON

Val McDermid

Jed Mercurio

Scotland

Omaze Million Pound House Draw

Omaze | Sponsored

People Born 1941 - 1971 Get This Benefit In July

British Seniors | Sponsored

Didcot - unsold senior SUVs from 2020

Unsold Cars | Search Ads | Sponsored

How to release the money tied up in your home

Age Partnership | Sponsored

Paul McGinn on what Hibs need to learn from Rangers' European calamity

The Scotsman



This website and its associated newspaper are members of Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO)

Follow us on

Explore

News

Business

Lifestyle

Heritage and Retro

Sport

Arts and Culture

Food and Drink

Future Scotland

More from The Scotsman

Announcements

Public Notices

Buy a Photo

Conferences

Jobs

Must Read

Directory

The Scotsman Archive

Useful Links

[Subscribe](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Readers Charter](#)

[Events](#)

[Website Archive](#)

©JPIMedia Publishing Ltd. All rights reserved.

[Cookie Settings](#)

[Terms and Conditions](#)

[Privacy policy](#)