

Q&A with Helen Fields

***Perfect Silence* is the fourth book to feature your detective duo, Luc Callanach and Ava Turner. Which is your favourite of the two characters to write?**

Luc and Ava are very different people, which is why it's so much fun to write dialogue for them when they're together. Ava's voice is easier for me to write. Whilst she's not based on me at all, I hear her voice in a really natural way. I suppose she is, in part, the person I always wanted to be. She's funny but tough, ambitious without self-importance, and doesn't care what the rest of the world thinks of her. Not that Ava doesn't have her demons, but she has an incredibly positive approach to problem solving most of the time. Luc is carrying an awful lot of personal baggage, so when I'm writing his character I constantly have to assess how that would affect his decision making, speech, and crucially his emotions. He's just as dedicated to his job as Ava, but is still struggling with making lasting personal connections. Luc is an altogether darker character to write. That said, my favourite scenes are when I've got them both in one place and they're dancing around the edges of how they feel about one another, both scared to admit their feelings either to each other or themselves. What I really love writing is those moments when Ava is teasing Luc. Those passages lighten up the more tense, unhappy parts of each book, and sometimes it's a relief to write them. Luc and Ava are headed for difficult times ahead though. Be warned.

The book deals with some dark issues and imagery. Do you ever find it difficult writing violent or harrowing scenes?

I find it incredibly difficult to write the violent scenes. As a writer, I believe we carry a responsibility to think carefully about why and how we write violence. It should never be gratuitous, and I'm

especially mindful to make sure whatever violence I write is plot-driven. I often ask myself what the violent scenes contribute and if they're really necessary. The truth is that when I'm writing the most traumatic scenes in my books, I often end up crying as I type, sometimes without even realising it until I've finished. Personally, I think that's a good thing. It's dangerous to be immune to the reality of violence. We should be affected by it, both as writers and as readers. I don't include it lightly in my books. This is where a great editor is absolutely invaluable. Sometimes you need to tone a scene down, or to set it in context better. Of course, these are also the scenes that are highly emotive and pulse-racing, so readers get the moments of high drama from them. It's really a balancing act. Go too far with violence and readers may not want to finish the book. Shy away from it, and there may be too much left unwritten so you don't share your vision fully. I rewrite the violent scenes in my books more than any other sections, always concerned that I have overstepped the mark. My hope in *Perfect Silence* was to really show the experience of the victims – their moments of hope and fear, their spirit and resilience. Writing about violence gives us the opportunity to show not only what perpetrators do to their victims, but also to explore first-hand what victims go through. I find that fascinating. It's the unspoken part of too many books and films. As a criminal barrister, I worked with victims when I was prosecuting, and cross-examined victims when I was defending. When I was working in family law, I spent time with numerous abuse victims of all ages and genders. So for me, violence isn't something I create in a vacuum. It's a fact of many people's lives that has to be handled with sensitivity and honesty, but I believe there's a place for exploring it in fiction.

Where did you get the inspiration for *Perfect Silence* from?

The inspiration for *Perfect Silence* came from one of my daughter's dolls. It was a very large rag doll, with the same hair and eye colour as my daughter. I heard my husband scream one day when he walked into her bedroom in the half light, to find the doll lying face down on the floor looking in pretty bad shape. For a second, he had believed it was our daughter. We got rid of the doll after that, but

the idea was already in my head of having dolls that were so similar to a child that you could mistake them. This developed over time in my subconscious to the idea of actually making a doll from a person, and *Perfect Silence* was born. After that, it was a question of working the concept backwards to figure out what would motivate someone to do that, and then getting through the gruesome process of researching how to do it. During the same period, my younger son appeared in a TV show as the childhood version of Ed Gein, an American serial killer who made various items from the skin of women he killed and those he dug up from graveyards, resulting from his unnatural obsession with his mother. Working with human skin has a very peculiar psychology behind it, which is both ghoulish and fascinating. The idea that really resonated with me is that creating a doll version of a child would mean no having to deal with arguments, no growing up, no rule breaking. From there, I got to the antagonist's backstory, and I began to write.

Some of the characters in your book have warped opinions on religion. What made you choose this as a topic in *Perfect Silence*?

The religious elements within *Perfect Silence* highlight the danger of using a text – any writing, in fact – out of context. It shows that if a perpetrator's mind is twisted enough, they can take any piece of information, even a picture, and apply its meaning beyond the limits of reality to support their own purpose. The Bible is a great resource for this, particularly the Old Testament, and there are some extremist religious groups across the world who choose to interpret sections of the Bible in a way that can produce some pretty hateful rhetoric. One of the interesting aspects was being able to bring back a character I loved from the first book - the Reverend Jayne Magee – to balance up the picture. Jayne is a real force for good, and was able to talk from an expert perspective about how the Bible can be misused and misinterpreted. What was also interesting to me was how one character in the book – Rachel – was able to use religion to control her brother, Samson. All doctrines, religious or otherwise, can be used to exert influence over people and that's a fascinating process, bound up in punishment, guilt, potential exclusion and rewards for compliance. Every reader will have a way of touching base with that, religious or not. Getting told off by your parents

or guardian, breaking school rules, being singled out as someone who doesn't toe the line, or who is different. *Perfect Silence* explores those themes in two ways. The main storyline with the dolls is about abusing traditional religious rules to justify horrific behaviour. The secondary storyline, about homeless people and drug addicts being branded, is about what happens when a group of people believes they are above the law, and that society's rules do not apply to them. I enjoyed the contrast between the two storylines, from the perspective of the psychology needed for the various antagonists to be comfortable with their choices.

What do you want your readers to feel when they reach the end of the book? Do you think all of the characters got what they deserved in the final pages?

This is a great question, and one I don't really ask myself in plain terms when I'm writing. Unlike the previous books in the series, *Perfect Silence* has a less solid resolution. There is an element of natural justice at the end of the book when one of the antagonists dies. For me, that was a moment of great relief. It's tricky to get it right, killing off a character who was involved in such evil acts. There will be readers who think he should have faced trial, taken responsibility for what he did and paid the price behind bars. The flip side of that is that he might not have been convicted. He might have used the fact that he was being controlled by his sister – and to an extent he was. For me, the resolution was the most appropriate one. Samson is a deeply disturbed character, with obvious personality disorder issues and a terribly dark past that only becomes clear at the end of the book. The simple fact is that I needed him to pay the ultimate price for that. I hope most readers will find it reassuring and just. His sister, Rachel, escapes justice. This can be a difficult ending as some readers will feel that the issues in the book have not been resolved in the way they wanted, but not every criminal is brought to justice in real life. Rachel is clever and devious. She planned for all eventualities, and the fact that she kept herself from being publicly linked to the crimes feeds into the fact that she also manipulated events to escape

initial detection. The resolution makes sense, even if it's not as perfectly wrapped up as we might like it. Not all the bad guys can get locked up, and Rachel may yet have a role to play in a future book.

How does your own experience as a criminal barrister affect your writing?

I've been lucky enough to meet a lot of extraordinary people through my legal work – both good and bad. I think the thing that struck me most was the extent to which our characters are shaped through adversity. I encountered people to whom terrible things had happened, but who came through stronger, wiser and more forgiving than you could ever anticipate. I also saw people who experienced cruelty, a lack of love, poverty, and abuse who were dragged down by it, some of them suffering irreparable psychological damage, and who ended up repeating that behaviour against others when they became adults. As a barrister, I learned to take nothing for granted about human nature. We can be as unpredictable as wild animals.

Having worked with the police on many cases, I also learned there was little substitute for the gut feelings of experienced officers. Sometimes what we put down to “just a feeling” is something that is seen, missing from, or is even as bizarre as a certain smell at a crime scene, which seeps into the unconscious and forms the basis of what investigators put down to a hunch. There's usually something beneath the surface that only becomes obvious in retrospect. This is great for detective stories, and it can be used very effectively in plotting.

What affected me more than anything though, was meeting with real victims. Sometimes these were obvious - someone assaulted or robbed, for example. Other victims are initially harder to identify. The wife and children of a man imprisoned for eighteen years after an armed robbery, left vilified in their community and without a source of income. And finally, the forgotten victims – those who are falsely accused. That was a huge source of inspiration when I was developing Luc Callanach's character regarding the events that led to him leaving Interpol and moving to Scotland.

What are you planning on writing next?

At the moment I'm in the process of writing book five in the Callanach & Turner series. I'm reaching the end of that manuscript now, which is always when I start thinking about ideas for the next book, so my brain is constantly running overtime. It's never just about a single plot when you're writing a series. I'm aware that I need to move every character's life forward a step, to challenge them or make sure I pick up where I left off in the previous book. Book five has quite a substantial focus on the characters' private lives. Things are getting a bit complicated between Luc and Ava, and it's important to get that right as there's been so much build up to it in the previous books. We are also reunited with some background characters who appeared briefly in previous books, and it's wonderful to have a new cast to grow and develop. I'm definitely sticking with the crime and thriller genre in the future. I've tried to write more light-hearted fiction, but sooner or later someone always picks up a weapon – whether I want them to or not!