

Q&A with Val McDermid

1. In *A Darker Domain*, you write about a small mining community and the impact of the Miners' Strike of 1984. What made you want to explore this subject and what was it like to research and write about?

I grew up in Fife, one of the UK's major coalfields. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents when I was growing up; they lived in East Wemyss, a mining village on the coast. I saw that community from the inside – close-knit, supportive, hard-working. Miners survived underground because they could rely on their crew and that quality spread through the rest of the community. Then in 1967, everything changed. There was an underground explosion and fire in the village pit, the Michael. Nine men died and the pit was closed down. The village died too – men moved with their families to other pits, leaving only the elderly behind.

So when I was covering the Miners' Strike of 1984 as a journalist in the north of England, I understood very clearly what was at stake for those communities. I knew then that if I ever managed to become a writer of fiction, I would want to write about the strike and the profound changes that it was the bellwether for in British society.

I didn't have to do much research; I knew much of what I was writing about from the inside. It was quite draining to revisit the death of coal mining and its legacy, but I'm glad I did it. It's so easy to forget the impact of recent history when current events seem to move so quickly.

2. This is the second novel to feature cold case expert DI Karen Pirie. What interests you about cold cases and what are the challenges of writing about them? How does this differ to writing your Tony Hill series?

Examining cold cases interests me because it lets me open a door into our recent past and look at it through the lens of the present. It also gives me an opportunity to write about the impact that

developments in forensic science have had on the investigation of crime. The challenge is getting the period detail and atmosphere right!

The main difference between the two series is the nature of the crimes under investigation. Tony and Carol focus on serial homicide, often with a sexual component. These crimes are violent and provoke turbulent reactions in all they touch. With the cold case novels, most of the deaths happen far in the past and so they don't deal so confrontationally with the nature of violence.

3. Karen Pirie is a fascinating and complex character, one who has featured in five of your novels. How has she changed over the course of the series, and what makes you enjoy writing from her perspective?

I don't think she's changed much; she's grown more confident of her professional abilities and she's had to deal with some very difficult personal issues, but at heart she remains the same. I like writing her because she's very direct and no-nonsense in her approach, but she's also a loyal and supportive colleague to those she respects. She doesn't take no for an answer, which doesn't always make for an easy time for her!

4. A key moment in this novel is the discovery of a clue in a run-down Tuscan villa. What made you decide to set part of the story in Italy and did you spend time travelling in the area?

After my son was born, we rented a place in Tuscany for six weeks and various friends came to visit. One of them used to go for a run early in the morning before it got too hot and she decided to explore a semi-ruined *casa colonica* halfway down the hill. And what she found there is very similar to what Bel finds in the book, apart from the bloodstain. It set the wheels turning in my head, and over the years, when I revisited the area, the background material accumulated around it.

5. Setting plays an important part in all of your stories, many of which take place in Scotland. What is it about this country and its landscape that inspires you? And why does it make such a good setting for crime fiction?

It's my home! Scotland has a wide variety of landscapes and environments so there's plenty to choose from to suit whatever story I want to tell. I've just written a book about the places in Scotland I've chosen to write about; why them and what they mean to me. Called *My Scotland*, it's a cross between a memoir and a travelogue with fabulous photographs.

6. Why is it that you choose to write crime fiction instead of other genres? And what is it about crime that continues to resonate with readers?

Probably because I got hooked on Agatha Christie at an early age and carried on reading as much crime fiction as I could get my hands on. Readers love it because it's faithful to the core elements of storytelling – beginning, middle, end – and in general, those who do bad things have bad outcomes. It's a kind of consolation as well – it's a difficult, alienating, dangerous world out there, but in the crime novel, there's always a Tony Hill or a Karen Pirie to put things right. It's a very good way of writing about contemporary society without being preachy. And I often think of something a private eye friend of mine once said. 'It's like watching lightning strike somebody else's house. If it's happening there, it's not happening here!'

7. You have recently published your 32nd novel. Has your writing process changed over the course of your career? And do you still approach the start of a new book in the same way?

I used to plot in great detail – a file card for each chapter or section of the book. Start at the beginning and work through to the end, occasionally taking diversions but always coming back to the road map. But about fifteen books in, that stopped working for me. I couldn't wrestle the story into that neat form. So now I write in a

much looser way. I know what the book's about; I know the general shape of the ending I'm aiming for; I know three or four key turning points along the way. But that's pretty much it. Of course, by the time I'm ready to start, as has always been the case, the book's been in my head for quite a while. Years, often. So I know the cast of characters and I know their world.

8. How did you decide to become a writer? Was it something you always wanted to do? And what do you think you would have done if you hadn't decided to write fiction?

I remember reading the Chalet School books when I was around nine or ten, and one of the characters was a writer. And in one book, she got a letter from her publisher with a cheque. That was the moment when I realised that being a writer was a proper job you could get paid for and that was when I knew what I wanted to be. If I hadn't gone down that road, I'd have liked to have been a musician – the Scottish Joni Mitchell!

9. If you were about to be stranded on a desert island and you could only take three books with you, which would you chose and why?

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, because it's a great story and it would suit the environment! Reginald Hill's *On Beulah Height*, because I think it's the perfect crime novel. And Anna Burns's *Milkman*, because it's the perfect marriage of form and content and politics. All three of them have a powerful narrative drive, vivid settings, memorable characters and they're all distinctively well written.