

Q&A with Stuart MacBride

Most of your novels are set in Aberdeen, but *Birthdays for the Dead* is set in the fictional town of Oldcastle.

Is it easier or more difficult to write about a place that doesn't exist?

It's a bit of both, to be honest. On the one hand, you can make up anything you like to suit the narrative, on the other I'm obsessed about not contradicting something I've said in a previous story. So if I've said St Jasper's Cathedral is on Jessop Street, two minutes from police headquarters, then that's where it's always got to be. I've ended up with a very detailed map of the city to keep myself from making mistakes about that kind of thing.

You write about very dark subjects, but there is still a lot of humour in your books. How do you go about getting the right balance between light and dark?

This is all about making the characters act and think like real people. Humour is often how we deal with darkness, especially if we work in teams, so it makes sense for me to allow my cast to express theirs. For a long, long time, police officers in crime novels were ROBOTS FOR JUSTICE, completely devoid of any discernible sense of humour, which, for me, denies them a key aspect of their humanity. Thankfully it's beginning to change now!

The book is packed with memorable characters, for example the forensic psychologist Dr Alice McDonald. Do you borrow from real people when creating your characters?

I love a good wander in a supermarket – it's a great opportunity to observe people and be inspired by their little ticks and foibles. Coming upon someone mid-conversation, with no idea of context, can spark things and connections I didn't even know existed inside my delicious squishy brain. It drives my wife mad when I do it, but I just can't help myself. Well, I probably could, but I don't want to.

There are some harrowing moments in this novel. Do you ever find it hard to write about violent subject matter?

Writing about this kind of thing is very different to reading about it. I can spend days on a scene, worrying away at each individual word, trying to get the whole thing working in the way I want it to. To make it have the desired impact on the reader. But someone will flash through that scene in five or ten minutes, so the experience is much more direct. It's all about what matters to the character in the moment and how the reader's going to react to it.

Scotland seems to be particularly good at producing excellent crime writers – is there something in the water there?

We are notoriously thrawn up here in Scotland and it's something that shines through in our crime fiction. Tell us to do "X" and we'll probably do "Y" instead. I think it comes from generations of being under the Kirk's rule – that dour Presbyterianism that looked on joy as something dirty and

sinful – we don't react well to authority and you can see it in all of our great fictional detectives. Plus we have the kind of weather that's uniquely suited to dark and brooding crimes.

You've been writing novels for many years now. Has your writing style changed over the years? And do you have a particular writing routine, or any rituals?

My style's changed hugely over the years and I'd be very disappointed in myself if it hadn't. I learn something new about writing with each book and I always want to do better next time, to apply that new knowledge and produce the best book I can. Readers deserve the best we can do, not to be lumbered with the bare minimum.

As for routine, I tend to write all day, every day, from about nine in the morning till seven in the evening. On a good day that'll get me about 1,500 words, though I'll probably have written twice that amount and deleted half of them.

A sentence can always be better!

My only ritual is that we break out the fizzy wine whenever I finish a draft of a novel. Nothing fancy, usually just a nice bottle of Australian sparkling. We try to celebrate the little things.

What are the best and worst things about being a writer?

When people hear I write crime novels they often think I'm playing detective, but I'm not, I'm doing what all writers do: I'm playing GOD. It's probably the only time in life that we have complete control over things – who lives, who dies, what the world is like ... that's all within my power. Of course then my editor and agent get involved and I'm not God any more, but while I am, it's a lovely feeling! Not having to do the morning rush-hour commute is a bonus too.

The worst thing about it is that I miss working with other people. The banter and camaraderie that comes with being in a team, with a common goal. I spend a lot of time in my own head with fictional characters, many of whom are pretty miserable because of the horrible things I've done to them.

When you are not hard at work writing novels, how do you switch off – what do you like to do to relax?

I've been really bad at this, so I'm trying hard to improve. I do enjoy cooking for my wife – you can keep your Celebrity Mastermind trophy, my proudest moment was winning the World Stovies Championship in 2014 – which is good for winding down after a day of fictional murder and mayhem, but not so good for our waistlines. I keep meaning to take up music again, so I've bought myself a banjo to try and guilt myself into playing it. I'm very much a work in progress...

Do you have a favourite writer, or writers?

I always recommend A.A. Milne's *Winnie The Pooh* and Spike Milligan's war diaries, but for more modern, less dead, writers I love a bit of M.C. Beaton, Allan Guthrie, Ray Banks, Eva Dolan, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, Charlie Williams... I could go on, and on, and on.

Oh and if you've not read *Hannah Green and Her Unfeasibly Mundane Existence* by Michael Marshall Smith you've been missing a real treat.