

Interview

Leigh Russell talks with Myles Allfrey



Myles Allfrey is co-founder with Adrian Muller of Crimefest, the international crime-fiction convention held annually in Bristol.

By day Myles works as a podiatrist in Tunbridge Wells.

The word is 'he's good with feet.'

So how did Myles become involved with an international event promoting crime fiction?

Mystery People caught up with him in the whirl of organisation of this world renowned conference to find out how it all came about.

Leigh: How did you first become involved with the setting up of Crimefest? Have you always been a fan of crime fiction?

Myles: I've always been a reader – I'd read anything. In 2000, I met the love of my life and started going to events at the now defunct Crime in Store in Covent Garden. My first big convention was Left Coast Crime in Las Vegas which was quite an eye-opener – I loved it! By this time I had got to know Adrian at events in the UK and one – not sober – evening at LCC he asked me if I would help him organise a one-off event on the left coast of the UK. I always say I forgot to say NO.

During the year following LCC Bristol we were approached by several people, including some publishers, who suggested we make it an annual event. Adrian and I are very different people but for this sort of thing we seem to complement each other.

Leigh: CrimeFest is well known for being a friendly festival. Given the numbers of people who attend each year, the atmosphere is astonishingly intimate. I wonder if the organisers work behind the scenes to create this welcoming feel to the festival, or has it just evolved naturally over the years?

Myles: We've kept it to scale deliberately to ensure it's one that we would like to attend ourselves, rather like an author writing a book they would like to read. We worked hard to create a platform and this is continually evolving because of people's natural instinct to mingle and enjoy the atmosphere.

Leigh: These days literary festivals, like books, are proliferating everywhere. CrimeFest remains a hugely significant event in the crime fiction calendar, attracting authors and readers from all round the world. I wonder if increasing numbers of literary events around the UK make it easier or more difficult for you to attract participants and audiences from within the UK?

Myles: This is a two-edged sword for us: the increase in events has added the idea of attending to the British psyche, but everybody has a limited budget, be they a reader, author or publishing house. I think we are still the only convention working on the American 'all inclusive' system and as such I feel we will always have people willing to get involved.

Leigh: It is hard to believe that CrimeFest has only been going since 2008. It feels to me as though it has always been there as a highlight of the crime fiction calendar. Can you tell us why you decided to embark on this time consuming project? Back in 2008, did you have an inkling that the convention would be such a success?

Myles: Short answer NO. After the one-off Left Coast Crime we took a year off and with encouragement and support of several publishers we started CrimeFest with the idea of keeping it, if not small, intimate. Over the ensuing years we have gathered together a small but dedicated team who give their time to make it work.

Leigh: Are you able to relax and enjoy the convention, or is there too much for you to do? Take us behind the scenes of CrimeFest and tell us about a typical day for you, while the convention is taking place.

Myles: My main input is during the convention week – I do very little in the run-up during the year, as Adrian is the main organiser, except to stop him spending too much - so I rarely get a chance to truly relax as there is always some issue to sort out. Typical day: up at 0630, leisurely breakfast (greeting convention-goers), then at 0745 the manic day starts with ensuring all rooms are set up for the first panels with the correct number of author chairs, microphones, water, audience seating, etc. The posters for the day's schedule are put up in their relevant places, and the reception desk is wheeled out of storage to welcome the day's attendees. As the day goes on we have a hurried lunch – usually hidden in a cupboard somewhere (compromising pictures exist) – and the only time we have to rest is while a panel is going on. When we have an evening do to sort out we have a quick five-minute

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that bathed the grey stone in colour, amber and purple, and several good grave-stones, including the celebrated 'skeleton' one. I got up to Mass in the Catholic cathedral, which was vast, the sort of place where you can't hear anyone else singing, and was mortified to have a small boy in front turn and stare as I launched into the first hymn. On Sunday afternoon, Dea, Jason and I explored the castle. Then it was on the bus to London (as quick as the Sunday train, with two changes and a detour via somewhere I'd never heard of).



I came back to the 'lambie snaa', an April downloosing of snow which never lasts long, but is rough on the new lambs while it lasts. We woke to a white-out, but by afternoon it had melted in the sun, and I could see how my garden had blossomed: green leaves on the roses, the first silver tufts of white beam leaves, the lovely green-bronze unfurling on the Chinese rowan, the grass sprouting, a scatter of china-blue chionodoxa, and daffodils everywhere.



I was off again that afternoon, for our writers' group Belmont weekend. For this, we hired the beautifully-restored Georgian house of Belmont on Unst (as in Island Parish). There had been a lot of e-mails flying to and fro about who would sleep where, and who take what food. We ended up with five of us squashed into a small car, with rucksacks and pans of food in our laps, and tumbled out in front of ... a locked door.



The caretaker had forgotten about us, which also meant no heating on. We spent Friday evening huddled in blankets as we did thought-jogging exercises, and took hot-water bottles to bed (I was in one of the box beds, great fun!) but by Saturday it had warmed up, and we spread out to concentrate – I bagged the small library with fantastic view across the water.

We shared our work that evening, after a sociable meal. By Sunday lunchtime we'd all managed a short story or clutch of poems, to be worked on for Writers' Group on Friday. A fantastic weekend. Now, I have to get back to normal, after all this gadding about ...

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breather after the panels are over before heading out again to make sure everything is ready. Depending on how the day has gone, we then join everyone in the bar at the end of the day, or go straight to bed and collapse.

Leigh: When you find time to relax what do you read?

As I said I will read anything, from 'boys' toys' to steampunk, some authors I will buy without reading the back cover such as Lee Child or Ben Aaronovitch. They are very different, but both draw me in, or more truthfully, out of this world. My time to read is limited, especially at the moment as I am involved with the judging for the CWA Gold Dagger which has a strict deadline. And of course that little event in May.

Leigh As authors and readers, we all believe crime festivals are important, and we owe a huge debt to you and the team who organise CrimeFest. What do you consider to be the most significant achievement of the convention?

Myles: This is not for me to say, but the generous nature of the majority of professionals in the crime fiction world means that our platform helps authors, would-be authors and readers meet and socialise in a fun and laid-back setting.

Thank you, Myles, for taking time out to talk to us.

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And that was it - the end of another professionally useful conference which also included lovely meetings with old friends and making new ones. There was a comment at one point of whether this weekend was really needed, when there are now so many crime weekends spread throughout the year ... I'd say, yes, definitely! Crime weekends are work, where you're trying to be on display, market yourself and meet readers. The CWA conference is enjoying spending time with your colleagues and talking about professional matters in an interesting setting.

Roll on Edinburgh, 21-23 April, 2017.