

## Crimefest 2013

As he looks forward to his appearance at Crimefest, **Michael Ridpath** explains the influence of the West on his latest novel that was 30 years in the making

Write what you know. That's what they tell would-be authors setting out on their first book, and by and large it is good advice.

It's what I did when I wrote my first novel, a financial thriller called *Free To Trade*. I was working as a bond trader in a bank in the City, and so I wrote a novel about a bond trader in the City discovering a fraud and a murder.

It worked pretty well, and I carried on to write seven more financial thrillers.

I was learning the craft of writing, and I think that my books were improving. But my sales, and hence my income, were declining. Either I was suffering a long slow bear market in financial thrillers, or I was wrong all along and my books just weren't any good.

I chose to believe that the trouble was with the market and not my skills as a writer, and decided that the time had come to test out these skills. I would square up to the big-name thriller writers in a field that they knew and I didn't, the Second World War.

There is another idea about writing bestsellers which is not nearly as useful as "write what you know", in fact I believe that it is a dangerous myth.

That is the notion that you need to analyse the market, see who sells well in it, and copy them. It might work some of the time, but it is unsatisfying to the writer and unsatisfying to the reader. It seems to me that if you want to establish your name as a favourite with readers, then you must ensure your books are different from those others out there. I believe a good way to pass a couple of evenings.

If you think of John Le Carré's *Spy Who Came In From The Cold* you will see what I mean. It's not just an exciting Cold War spy thriller, it's about deceit, corruption, betrayal and how the espionage world both attracts the morally flawed and encourages them.

So how could I find a unique perspective on the Second World War, the period that has probably had more books written about it than any other?

I returned to my childhood, or more accurately my adolescence. I went to school in Somerset, Millfield, and was taught history by a couple of excellent teachers.

**'If you want to establish your name as a favourite with readers, then you must ensure your books are different'**



The West Country features in Michael Ridpath's latest novel *Traitor's Gate*

PICTURE: WWW.CHRISGEORGE.COM

## Could 'writing what you know' be a dangerous myth?

I studied the 20th century for A level, and the wholesale destruction of youth that was the First World War made a big impression on me. I was also taught to make up my own mind about the whys and the hows of history, to question the established view. And it struck me very clearly why appears in the late 1930s tried to do every last thing they could not to fight a war to avoid a war, especially when the "war to end all wars" had already been fought so disastrously 20 years before.

In retrospect appeasement was clearly a bad idea, but perhaps it seemed a good idea at the time, or at least an honourable one.

These feelings were strengthened when I went to university at Oxford. In many of the rooms of my college hung a little wooden plaque with the name of the undergraduate who had

resided there in 1914 and the year he died, often also 1914, sometimes 1915, occasionally 1916. And, of course, it wasn't just the British who died in large numbers. So did the French and the Russians. And the Germans. Let's not forget the Germans.

One of my best friends at Millfield, Christoph, was actually German. He was tall, with blond hair, blue eyes and a long stride. He was teased, almost to the point of bullying. It occurred to me then, and I believe it is still true, that Germans are the one people that it is still somehow permissible for Britons to hate.

But there are good Germans: Christoph was one and there are millions more when he came from. That was true in the 1970s, but was it true in the 1930s? It must have been. So who were these good Germans?

It was these ideas, more feelings

really that had been percolating for 30 years, and which steered me towards the subject of my novel *Traitor's Gate*. Two young idealists, a German and an Englishman, meet at Oxford in the 1930s. They vow never to fight each other. Then, in 1938, as their two countries seem on the brink of war, and of a war not just between nations but between good and evil, they meet again in Berlin. Should Theo, the German, join his fellow German officers planning to assassinate Hitler? And should Conrad, the Englishman, work with the German secret service to help them carry out their plot? Or are they being duped? Are each of them betraying their country, or their ideals, or both?

Don't worry, *Traitor's Gate* isn't a political treatise or an essay on ethics, it's a thriller through and through, and I have used all my hard-won skills to keep the pages turning. But it has become an important book for me to write, and I hope that this will come across to the reader. Perhaps, in some ways, I was writing about what I knew all along after all. Maybe that's also why when Conrad returns to Britain to escape the tension and dread of a modern militarised Berlin, he takes the train to Castle Cary and follows behind a herd of dairy cows ambling towards his parents' house under the shadow of Glastonbury Tor.

*Traitor's Gate* is published on June 1 by Head of Zeus

### Crimefest 2013

Crimefest is an international crime fiction convention that has brought authors and readers together in Bristol every year since 2006. The programme includes panel discussions, workshops and interviews with leading names in the crime fiction field.

This year's event will take place at the Bristol Marriott Royal Hotel from May 30 to June 2, and participating authors include Ann Cleeves, Jeffrey Deaver and Sophie Hannah. For more details go to [www.crimefest.com](http://www.crimefest.com).

THE INTERNATIONAL CRIME FICTION CONVENTION



### Win tickets

Pull passes to the event have now sold out, but *West Country Life* is giving one lucky reader the chance to win a pair of passes worth £150 each so that they can attend all panels and interviews from Thursday through to Sunday. Two runners-up will win a selection of books and a *Sherlock* box set of series 1 and 2.

To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer this question:

On the Saturday afternoon at this year's Crimefest, Felix Francis is being interviewed about his famous author father. What is his father's name?

Send your answer on a postcard, together with your name, address and telephone number, and an email address if you have one, to:

**Crimefest Competition, Western Daily Press, Temple Way, Bristol BS99 7HD, or email your answer and contact details to [andy.vallis@b-nm.co.uk](mailto:andy.vallis@b-nm.co.uk)**

The closing date is noon on Wednesday May 8. The winners will be selected at random after this date, and be notified by Friday, May 10.

The normal *Western Daily Press* terms and conditions apply.



Sherlock box sets can be won Picture: BBC

### Discount on tickets

There are a limited number of Saturday passes still available, and *Western Daily Press* readers are being offered the chance to buy them at the special price of £49 – a 40 per cent saving on the normal price of £70.

The pass gives access to all the panels, interviews and the "Creating Sherlock" event taking place on that day. The passes can be bought at [www.crimefest2013.eventbrite.com](http://www.crimefest2013.eventbrite.com) using the discount code: **west-erndaily**.

## Crimefest2013

# How a bird helped my writing career to really take off

Crimefest regular **Ann Cleeves** describes the long journey from Devon to Shetland that has turned her into one of the most successful authors writing today

I grew up in the West Country, in North Devon, and later I married a Bristolian. So how did I come to write one series set in Northumberland and another in Shetland – as far away from the South West as it's possible to get in the UK?

The connection with Shetland started a long time ago. I'd dropped out of university and quite by chance I was offered a job as assistant cook in the bird observatory on Fair Isle. I wasn't even quite sure where Fair Isle was until I looked at a map, and then I discovered that it was a very long way from home. It's a 13-hour overnight ferry trip from Aberdeen to Shetland and the last leg of the journey from Grutness, at the south of Shetland mainland, to Fair Isle was truly horrible. The weather had been stormy, there was still a swell and by the time I arrived at the Isle in the mail boat Good Shepherd I was very seasick.



Ann Cleeves, one of the most successful authors in the UK today, will be at Crimefest

But it was spring, the puffs were back on the cliffs and there were flowers on the low-lying land close to the observatory.

Fair Isle then had a population of about 50 (it's a bit higher now), swelled in the spring and autumn by visiting birdwatchers. Within a week I felt part of the rhythm of island life, the crofting, the bird migration, the music and the stories. I listened to gossip in island kitchens and those tales have become part of the *Shetland* novels. My spare time was spent reading then though, not writing, and it would be 30 years before *Raven Black*, the first of the quartet, was published.

At the end of my first autumn a group of birdwatchers arrived and I was attracted to one of them by his West Country accent and the bottle of malt whisky tucked at the top of his rucksack. Tim returned to Fair Isle the following summer and he proposed after we'd spent a day's hay-making on a friend's croft.

He worked for the RSPB and in 1987 we moved to north-east England where he became conservation officer. The year before, my first crime novel had been published, and immediately I decided that Northumberland's dramatic coastal scenery and interesting post-industrial landscape would make a fitting backdrop for the books.

Vera Stanhope was created quite by chance. I was writing a stand-alone

novel about three women living and working in the Northumberland hills and the plot was going nowhere. So I took a tip from Raymond Chandler who gave this advice to writers struggling with plot: "Have a door open and a guy come in with a gun." I don't really do guns, but I had a door open, the door of a church during a funeral service, and in came Vera Stanhope, more like bag lady than detective, fully formed and ready to meet the world. I liked her so much that the stand-alone novel became a series and I've just delivered the sixth Vera book to my publisher.

I was in the middle of a Vera Stanhope book when a very rare bird turned up in Shetland. Tim's a passionate birdwatcher and he was desperate to see the American coot that had arrived in Lerwick, the main town in Shetland, so we decided to go. We arrived on the ferry in mid-winter to a bleak and snowy morning. After seeing the coot we spent the rest of the day with friends. It was a clear and startlingly beautiful one, the sun came up and the resident ravens looked very black against the snow. I thought if there was blood as well, I would have a very strong visual scene, with almost the elements of a fairy story.

So *Raven Black*, the book that would change my writing career, was begun. It won the CWA Gold Dagger, has been translated into more than 20 languages and adapted for radio. *Dead Water*, the fifth book in the series was published in January Last month, *Red Bones* appeared as a BBC drama under the title *Shetland* and starring Douglas Henshall. All because a rather boring bird lost its way and ended up on a loch in Lerwick.

The television also happened quite by chance. Elaine Collins a books executive with ITV Studios found *The Crow Trap*, the first Vera Stanhope novel, in her local Oxfam shop. They were looking for a detective series with a strong female lead, commissioned a script from Paul Rutman and series three of *Vera* starring Brenda Blethyn will be broadcast later this year. Elaine is now executive producer on both *Vera* and *Shetland*. That too has all the elements of a fairy story.

So that is how I came to see my books so far from where I started out. I still come back to the West Country every year though, to visit friends and family. And to take part in Crimefest, which brings crime writers from all over the world to Bristol. It's a friendly festival, where readers, new writers and more experienced authors meet to share their enthusiasm for great books.

*Dead Water*, the fifth Shetland novel, was published by Pan Macmillan in January, priced £16.99



PICTURE: ITV



PICTURE: BBC

Above, *Shetland* starring Steven Robertson; and top, Vera with Brenda Blethyn in the title role, are both successful TV series adapted from books by Ann Cleeves, she says: "The television happened quite by chance"

**Tim Weaver** is a journalist and best-selling novelist who lives in Bath. His latest novel, *Never Coming Back*, will be published in August. He will be taking part in a panel discussion at Crimefest on Friday, May 31. Here, he helps *West Country Life* with its inquiries



### How did you begin writing fiction?

I'd been a big reader, from as far back as I can remember, and writing just seemed a natural extension of that. I think I must have been the only kid in the world who asked their parents for a typewriter instead of a Millennium Falcon for their 11th birthday.

Can you describe a typical writing day? I think it depends what part of the process you're at. At the start of a book, it's still new and exciting and you come back to your desk every day looking forward to diving back in. But there's a stage – like clockwork – about 20,000 words into a book when the doubt kicks in: you start to worry whether the premise is good enough, whether the characters work, whether you've got it yet and you come back to your desk every day looking forward to diving back in. But there's a stage – like clockwork – about 20,000 words into a book when the doubt kicks in: you start to worry whether the premise is good enough, whether the characters work, whether you've got it yet and you come back to your desk every day looking forward to diving back in. But there's a stage – like clockwork – about 20,000 words into a book when the doubt kicks in: you start to worry whether the premise is good enough, whether the characters work, whether you've got it yet and you come back to your desk every day looking forward to diving back in.

How do you generate new characters and plot ideas? I don't think ideas are the problem, necessarily. To be honest, ideas come to me all the time.

Do you spend much time on research? In short, yes! Each book has its own demands, though: for my first, *Chasing the Dead*, I did a lot of reading on cults; for my second, *The Dead Tracks*, I went out and spoke to police officers (and a fascinating former chief constable) as the book included a lot of police procedural detail, which was important to get right; my third, *Vanished* was based in and around the London Underground, and in particular the network's disused "ghost" stations, so again you have to remain true to that world, or people will see the joins.

Does the West Country feature much in your fiction? There are sections set in Bristol in my first book, but mostly it's set in London, as are the second and third. However, my fourth, *Never Coming Back*, is set closer to home, in south Devon, Oh, and Las Vegas.

What attracts you to crime writing? It allows you to touch on big themes – fear, conflict, shock, loss, grief, love. Genuinely some of the most emotional stories I've ever read have been thrillers.

Who are your own favourite crime writers? Michael Connelly was, and still is, a major influence on me: I read his first book – *The Black Echo* – when I was 16 or 17, and it feels like I've grown up reading him over the course of the last twenty years. He's a genius.

What advice would you give an aspiring crime writer? Find the character or story that will help you stand out from the crowd. Plan meticulously before putting a single word on the page. Never give up, even when the doubt kicks in.