

Where does evil come from?

Crime writer Ian Rankin shares his views

An interview with Jim Napier

As part of a cross-country tour launching his latest book The Impossible Dead, Ian Rankin visited Quebec recently, and crime fiction reviewer Jim Napier caught up with him in Montreal. Over a pie and a pint they discussed Rankin's phenomenal career as the biggest-selling crime writer in Britain, the craft of writing, his latest work, and his views on the origins of crime.



Ian Rankin (on the right) with crime fiction reviewer Jim Napier

Where to start? I said. With all the honours and accolades -- Five honorary degrees, published in thirty-five languages, I asked, do you ever get up in the morning and look in the mirror and say "Who is that guy?"

“It depends on how heavy a night I’ve had the night before!” he joked. “At the end of the day none of that means very much, compared to writing the next book, because it doesn’t mean you’re going to write a better book, or even that you’re going to write a book at all. The biggest challenge you’ve got is to sit down with a blank screen or blank sheet of paper, with a good idea in your head, that’s going to consume you for the next six months. Sometimes the accolades give you a little bit of confidence...When I won the Gold Dagger (in 1997, for *Black and Blue*), I wasn’t selling so well, and the publishers were thinking maybe they’d just let me go. [But] what that did was to confirm to them that maybe they should hold on to me, and confirmed to me that I knew what I was doing. But it was a very long process, so when the honours eventually came, I embraced them, I reckon I’ve earned them. But you know McCall-Smith, two doors up from me? I’ve got the Order of the British Empire, but he’s a Commander of the British Empire, so if I meet him in the street I have to kneel down before him! Well, not really,” he grinned.

Over the past twenty years Rebus has come to dominate British crime fiction... I asked Ian what he thought accounted for Rebus’s popular appeal.

“I wish I knew,” he admitted. “The first three novels didn’t do very well at all... But slowly he grew as a character, he became more complex, [and] I became more confident that I knew the inside of his head, and readers became attached to him, and booksellers began hand-selling my books to people who hadn’t heard of me... So I think the books got better, Rebus grew more human, more three-dimensional...and readers became more involved with him.”

It’s been a few years since Rankin retired Rebus and created his successor, Malcolm Fox. Many readers, myself included, at first tended to see him as Rebus reborn, but I admitted that in retrospect that was a bit unfair.

“I do think I tried hard to put some clear blue water between Rebus and Fox,” he said. “The very nature of the job that Fox does, Internal Affairs, means that he has to be a different kind of cop. When he starts he’s the kind of guy who always follows the rules. He has to be whiter than white, cleaner than clean. He has to work well in a small team, because Internal Affairs are mistrusted and hated by everybody else in the police force. Rebus never worked well in a team, he never followed authority. But what I then wanted to do was take this guy, this character who is essentially passive, a professional voyeur, and turn him into a man of action...and learn from people around him that he has to cross the line occasionally... So by the end of *The Complaints* [Rankin’s first novel featuring Malcolm Fox] he’s a little bit like Rebus in that he’s someone that’s more active, and he’s not always going to obey the rules. But he’s still a long way from Rebus, I think. He’s very close to his father and his sister, [whereas] Rebus had a brother and a daughter and an ex-wife, but we hardly see them and he hardly thinks about them. He’s very much of a loner. He’s a guy who enjoys his own company. Malcolm Fox lives alone, but

likes to help people around him...and he's not as cynical as Rebus, so I can [also] show a different side to Edinburgh through him, show the reader that Edinburgh is not simply a series of crime scenes, that there's a really beautiful, cultured city out there, that Malcolm can see, that Rebus no longer can."

And setting is a keystone of your stories.

"Yeh. I love that sense of immersion you can get when you read a really good crime novel [with] a strong sense of place. I like that people can come to Edinburgh and walk around and can say 'That's Rebus's apartment, that's the police station where he works, that's the pub where he drinks,' because then you get the suspension of disbelief [and] they start to believe everything else you put in there that didn't actually happen. And Edinburgh has that ambiguous personality, doesn't it? *Jeckyl and Hyde* is built into the very nature of the stone. There's the New Town and the Old Town. The New Town [actually built in the mid-to-late 18th century] designed to a rational plan, the Old Town just grew up higgledy-piggledy, chaotic. And as a young man Robert Louis Stevenson, whose family were engineers – rational people – he would creep out of the house in the dead of night and go up the hill to the old town, to consort with vagabonds drunks, poets and prostitutes. He was attracted to that side of life, that chaotic side. And that's what most good Scottish crime fiction and most good Scottish fiction has been about."

I'm thinking that it's a very good thing you weren't born in Dorking or St Mary's Mead, I said. We wouldn't have the Rebus tales.

"No, we wouldn't," he admitted. "That was the nice thing about being a Scottish writer, that we didn't have Agatha Christie, and we didn't have Raymond Chandler, [so] there was no [crime fiction] tradition for us to be part of. For a long time the English crime novel was blinkered by the sense that you had to write [a certain] kind of crime novel that had to be set in a village, that had to feature an amateur detective, a spinster or country gentlemen, and, almost like a Shakespearean comedy things would be shaken up but at the end everything would be ok. And that just doesn't happen in real life: someone commits a murder, the status quo is not going back. That's broken forever. It's taken away something irreplaceable from the world."

I asked Ian where he plans to take Fox. Pointing out that Rebus faced larger-than-life foes—Bible John, Big Ger Cafferty—in some of his most successful books, I asked whether he foresaw Malcolm Fox facing that sort of nemesis.

His response was guarded. [As an officer in the Complaints] "there's [only a limited] range of stuff he can do, unlike a homicide cop. Plus you only go into the Complaints for four or five years, then you go back to normal duties, which must be really strange. I quite fancy that one, really: [a novel] where you go back to your station after being in Internal Affairs, and you're a pariah. Either

that or having him investigate Rebus for some past misdemeanor,” he laughed.

I noted that Siobhan was a valuable presence in the Rebus books, and wondered whether we'd see her in the Fox stories.

“She was in the first draft of *The Complaints*,” Ian acknowledged, “but she’d been reduced to a secondary character, and I knew she deserved better than that, so I took her out. But...there’s no tradition of men writing well about women in crime fiction. You think nothing about Ruth Rendell or P. D. James having a male protagonist, but until McCall Smith came along I can’t think of a really successful male writer with a female protagonists. Women can get inside men’s heads, but [generally] men can’t get inside women’s heads. But people – women cops and women writers, and readers -- say ‘Oh, I like Siobhan, she seems quite accurate, you should do a book from her point of view, and I think, well, maybe one day.’”

I asked Ian where he thought crime fiction is headed.

“There seems to be an ongoing vogue for gothic Grand Guignol serial killers,” he noted, “but mostly it’s the Scandinavians doing it. You know, the Jo Nesbo style serial killer who builds snowmen outside peoples houses before killing them. [But] if you want to be a successful serial killer don’t leave snowmen outside [your victim’s] houses; it’s a bit of a giveaway after awhile. But he has a gigantic following. For me, what I like about the crime novels is what it tells us about ourselves, what it tells us about society. And we don’t have too many Grand Guignol serial killers. The serial killers we apprehend and put on trial are usually sad loners, low-IQ individuals who just got lucky for a long time, or who preyed on people who were just never going to be noticed as being missing. We don’t get too many Hannibal Lectors in real life; they come along maybe once in a generation. So I can use the crime novel to talk about any issue I want, whether it’s the financial crisis, racism, illegal immigration, the gulf between the haves and have-nots, the crime novel is preeminently suited to talking about these things. The readers are busy taking the roller coaster ride, [enjoying] the vicarious thrill that you’re giving them, but at the same time you’re dealing with some serious issues along the way, and making readers think what would I do in this situation? Why have we gone wrong as a society? Why do we continue to do bad things to each other? That’s the kernel of all this. That’s the question that we keep knowing away at as writers, and that fascinate readers: where does evil come from? Is it nature or nurture? These are big, basic questions to which we have no answers as yet.”

I mentioned that I'd heard he was involved in a creative writing programme in Edinburgh. His response surprised me.

“I’m down as Honorary Fellow or some such thing,” he admitted. “I’ve never been to a creative writing course in my life. I’m not sure I believe in it. I think

if someone's got talent, you can help them, but you can't turn people into writers. What you can do, with a person whose got a lot of quality in their writing; what you can then do is offer a little bit of editing advice and a lot of commercial advice: how do you get a publisher to read it? Should you get an agent first? All that I can talk about, but I cannot talk about how to improve [a specific] paragraph, because I never think about that stuff when I write. The way that I write my novels is the last thing you want to tell a creative writing student, because I just make it up as I go along. And I'm not alone. I've spoken to other crime writers as well [and they say] I start with a theme, a question I want to find an answer to, I find a plot that will allow me to deal with that theme, usually a murder, but it doesn't have to be a murder, and by the first twenty or thirty pages certain things will have happened: we'll have found out who the victim is, we'll have talked to the family, the people he worked beside, we'll be introduced to the police officers, the people in the mortuary, and suddenly you've got ten or twenty people and they will tell you where to go next. The story has an internal logic that I don't start to see until I'm writing the book. So when I start a book I have no idea who the killer is!"

Last year was a time of tribulation for Ian's fans. For the first time in twenty years he took a break and didn't put out a novel. I asked him what he did with his time, and what it was like, not writing.

"I'll never do it again," he said. "It was my busiest year ever! Because I wasn't writing a book people jumped at me with offers of things I could do. So I ended up trying to write a film script. That took a long time [and] I don't think it will ever get made, but who knows? I also wrote introductions for other people's books, I went to lots of [writers'] festivals, I went to India on a tour. I wrote some lyrics for a local band in Edinburgh. I was so busy because I didn't have the one golden excuse, that I was writing a book. So I'll never do it again, Jim. From now on it's a book a year."

Which brought us to his current novel, The Impossible Dead. Without giving too much away, I asked him to say a bit about it.

"That's easy," he replied. "In October of 2009, in *The Scotsman* newspaper, there was a story about a suicide that happened in 1985, and questions were being asked about whether it was a suicide or not. A prominent lawyer, who was a friend to Scottish Independence paramilitary groups, and may have been their paymaster, was found dead in his car on a stretch of lonely road in the Highlands of Scotland, with a bullet hole in his head. It was put down as suicide although there was no note, and no apparent reason for him to have committed suicide. He was being watched by Special Branch, his house and office had been broken into, and there were all these questions about his death. And I thought, oh, that's pretty interesting. I don't remember that. So I went to the library in Edinburgh and pulled all the newspapers for the early Eighties and started reading. It was a febrile time in politics: the nationalists in Scotland had [only] 15% approval in the polls, and they're now in power.

Back then you'd have thought we're never going to get independence, and the only way to get it is through the bullet and the bomb. They were sending anthrax to government departments, they tried to blow up Princess Diana when she visited Glasgow – all that stuff actually happened! And I thought, where are they now? What's happened to these people? What happens to terrorists when they start to get what they want without using terrorism? Another story in the papers round about the same time was about a bent copper, so I thought, well, that's something for Malcolm Fox to work on. And while he's working on that he can find out about this 1980s apparent suicide. So that was the genesis of the book: that's all it took: two stories in a newspaper.”

He makes it sound easy.

Jim Napier is a crime fiction reviewer for several Canadian newspapers. His reviews have also appeared on the websites *Crimetime*, *Spinetingler*, *The Rap Sheet*, *Shots Magazine*, and *January* magazine, and his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*.

He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



© Jim Napier 2011