

# Rankin returns

## *Scottish crime writer shares his views*

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### *Suspended Sentences*

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by Jim Napier



**A**s part of a cross-country tour launching his latest book *The Impossible Dead*, Scottish crime writer Ian Rankin visited Quebec recently, and *Record* 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, and his latest novel.

*Where to start? I asked him. With all the honours and accolades—too many awards to count, five honorary degrees, your books published in thirty-five languages—do you ever get up in the morning and look in the mirror and say “Who is that guy?”*

He laughed. “It depends on how heavy a night I’ve had the night before! 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? [Alexander McCall Smith, author of the *No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series] 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,” Ian 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 I think that was a bit unfair.*

“I do think I tried hard to put some clear blue water between Rebus and Fox,” he admitted. “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 [have him] 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."

*So you think setting is important?*

"I recently read Louise Penny's book [*Bury Your Dead*] which is all about Quebec City, the history of it and the now. [Readers] can go and eat in the [same] restaurants, and can walk down streets and go to the library [in the story]. I love that sense of immersion you can get when you read a really good crime novel that's got a strong sense of place."

*And that's a keystone of your own stories.*

"Yeh. 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 the pub where he drinks' because then you get the suspension of disbelief: they start to believe everything else you put in there, that didn't actually happen."

*Last year was a time of tribulation for your fans. For the first time in twenty years you took a break, and didn't put out a novel. What did you do with your time, and what was it like, not writing?*

"I'll never do it again. 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 back to a book a year."

*Which brings us to your current novel, The Impossible Dead. Without giving away too much, can you say a bit about how it came about?*

"In October of 2009, in *The Scotsman*, there was a story about a suicide 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.*

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