

A Conversation with Ian Rankin

by Jim Napier,

Crime fiction reviewer for the Sherbrooke *Record*

Recently crimewriter Ian Rankin came to Canada to launch his latest and last novel featuring Edinburgh sleuth John Rebus. Record mystery Reviewer Jim Napier was able to sit down with Rankin for an exclusive inter-view. The following are excerpts from that interview.

He was sitting in a corner of the mammoth lobby of the Westin Castle Harbour hotel, on the Toronto waterfront. It was a grey day, the fog obscuring much of the city skyline. Perfect Rebus weather. Ian had found himself a comfortable chair out of the traffic flow, and was wearing jeans and a black tee shirt and nursing an extra-large Starbucks when I arrived. Even at that hour — it was just nine am — the lobby was a beehive of activity. Ian was protected by a coterie of handlers, publicists and other journalists.

“Hey, Jim,” he said as I approached. “It’s been awhile!”

As we sat down I reminded him that the first time we’d met, at the Dagger Awards dinner in London, in 1997. It was a gala affair, the sort of thing that the British do best. Held at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, perhaps three hundred of the best known crime writers from Britain and elsewhere, and lesser luminaries (including yours truly) were in attendance, almost everyone resplendent in Black Tie. It was a memorable event, especially for a relatively young writer from Edinburgh who was receiving that evening the CWA Macallan Gold Dagger Award for Crime Fiction. What made Ian Rankin’s appearance all the more notable was that he showed up wearing a light-coloured linen suit with, as I recall, a



Ian Rankin with crime reviewer Jim Napier

black tee shirt. He looked much the same that morning, and I commented on it.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Some guys just look good in black tie. I don’t. I’m not comfortable with something around my neck.”

I suggested that, given the number of people he’d killed off in his novels, he might want to get used to having something around his neck; then I moved on to his writing. “So what is it, the water in your neighborhood?” An oblique reference to the fact that two of his neighbors include the well-known writers, J. K. Rowling (of *Harry Potter* fame) and Alexander McCall Smith (author of *The Sunday Philosophy Club* and *No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series). Surely more world-class authors per square kilometer than anywhere else on earth.

He laughed. “You know, I only found out about it by accident when I moved into the area, and a neighbour felt obliged to put me in my place. She said ‘You’re not the only famous writer here, you know. Alex McCall Smith lives just two doors down!’ Later

I learned that J. K. Rowling lives just around the corner. The fact is I couldn't have afforded that house even five years ago. It's only in the last four years that my royalties have allowed me to make the move."

I steered our conversation back to his work. "You majored in English Lit at university. In the eyes of most academics, crime writing is not exactly literary fiction. What prompted you to move in that direction?"

He paused before responding. "I didn't set out to be a crime writer. In fact, except for the odd bit I'd not read any crime fiction. My first manuscript wasn't accepted anywhere. I wanted to explore the dark, Gothic side of Edinburgh. So I branched out."

"And so you invented Detective Inspector John Rebus: a taciturn, enigmatic loner who loses friends almost as often as he makes new enemies. Did he spring full-blown into your imagination, or did the character of Rebus take some time to evolve?"

I could be wrong, but I thought I saw Rankin blush. "When I look back at the early Rebus novels I'm embarrassed. I mean, here's a guy with no university education quoting Walt Whitman and listening to classical music! There's no way a guy with his background would even know of Walt Whitman."

"Readers want to know how much of Rankin there is in Rebus, and vice versa"

"Rebus and Rankin aren't that similar," he replied. "Sure he's a loner, and I'm more comfortable with a pint in a pub than at a fancy party. Beyond that, we're very different people. Rebus is not educated. I'm the brainy one in the family, the first to go on to university. I'm much more like Siobhan," he said, referring to Rebus's partner.

"In your current novel, *Exit Music*, Rebus is in his final week of work before retirement, and wrestling with the notion of enforced idleness. For a long time Siobhan has been in Rebus's shadow. Now that he is being put out to pasture, is Siobhan going to become a sort of surrogate Rebus, taking on his confrontational, corner-cutting traits, or will she carve out her own way of doing things?"

"No question: Siobhan is becoming her own person. You'll see that as she gets out from under Rebus's thumb. Wait for the next one," he grinned.

"Many of our readers are interested in the writing process. Can you talk a bit about how you write?"

"Well, for starters, I can't write just anywhere. Alex McCall-Smith, the jammy bugger, can write wherever he is: hotel rooms, airports, trains. I'm not like that. I have to be at home. Once the kids are off to school, around nine, I settle in."

"I begin with a question, or a theme," he continued. "How do we as a society treat paedophiles? What if a war criminal settled in Edinburgh? Interestingly, I wrote *The Hanging Garden* [about a war criminal] while I was living in France. I didn't know it, but at the same time an Edinburgh paper ran a story about a World War II war criminal living there. He sued the paper for libel, but lost; then he died shortly afterward. A good thing: he'd probably have sued me too.

"To get back to your question, I begin with a theme. The first thirty or forty pages write themselves, and the last twenty pages as well." He laughed. "Then there's this great yawning chasm of three hundred pages in between.

"Often a character I start with becomes unnecessary, and will die somewhere in the middle, and someone I hadn't originally

thought of, I'll say 'Yeah, they could have done it.' When I started the Rebus books Siobhan wasn't an important figure, just someone to help Rebus with his investigations. The same with Cafferty [Edinburgh crime lord, and Rebus's nemesis]: he began as a minor character and just grew."

Ian shifted in his chair, and I could see that his handlers were getting restless. "You've had an enormous impact on crime fiction in the past two decades, inventing the genre known as Scottish (or Tartan) Noir. Where do you think crime writing goes from here?"

"It's hard to say, except that it's getting more realistic. Less of the small village sleuths and bodies in the drawing room, more gore."

"Is that a good thing, in your opinion?" I asked.

"You don't need to write about the gore. Readers will fill that in for themselves. Interestingly, more women writers are including more gore and grit, while fewer men are. I don't know if it's a case of women reclaiming violence [as a topic for themselves] or what. There are lots of good young writers out there. God, I'm only forty-seven and I feel like an elder statesman."

"One of the perks of having the phenomenal success that you've had is that a lot of doors begin to open to you. What's in store for the future?"

"I'm not going to be less busy, that's for sure. My writing projects are scheduled through 2010. Some fantastic opportunities are coming my way. Would you believe I'm currently writing a libretto for an opera? One of five Scottish writers paired with five Scottish composers. All part of the new nationalism since the repatriation of the Scottish Parliament. Really exciting. And DC Comics discovered that I'm a comic-

book fan, and asked me to do a Rebus comic, or 'graphic novel' as it's called these days. Hard stuff: a lot like a storyboard for a movie. Pages and pages of very specific directions for maybe one line of dialogue. But great fun. All the things you wanted to do as a kid."

"Not to mention the merchandising: Rebus tours of Edinburgh, a Rebus ale, and, I understand, even a Rebus whisky."

"Yes, the folk at Highland Park asked me to taste several casks and select one. They drew just 147 bottles from it, and they've all been given to various charities. Last night one was auctioned off at the PEN benefit; it fetched \$1,200!"

The handlers were really getting anxious by this point, with a line of other journalists waiting for their chance; I'd run well over my allotted time. I finished my coffee and thanked Ian. He insisted that when I next come to Edinburgh that I look him up and share a pint.

Some guys will do anything for a drink.

Jim Napier can be reached at jim.napier52@gmail.com