

The Vanishing Point

Val McDermid explores the terror of a missing child

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier



HARD ON THE HEELS of last year's success, *The Retribution*, Scottish novelist Val McDermid has released her latest crime thriller, *The Vanishing Point*. It is a story rooted in every parent's worst nightmare: while flying from England to California, a woman and a five-year-old child are separated at an security checkpoint in Chicago's O'Hare Airport. Detained by officers due to a metal plate in her leg, she sees a man approach the boy, and they go off together. She panics, and the security people misread her actions, tasing her as she resists their efforts to control her. By the time order is restored, the boy has disappeared.

WHEN VAL CAME TO TORONTO recently to promote her work she kindly made time to answer a few questions. Always intrigued by an author's dedications, I began by asking why she had dedicated *The Vanishing Point* in

part to the late British crime writer, Reg Hill. "Reg was one of the first crime writers I got to know personally," she replied, "and he was very generous and supportive to me early in my career. I'd been a fan of his work for years, and I couldn't quite believe that one of my heroes could turn into a friend. We became good friends over the years and we shared a similar sense of humour. For example, his riposte to my christening my criminal profiler 'Hill' was to crack a joke in a Dalziel and Pascoe novel about my football team, Raith Rovers. I loved his work and took inspiration from his ample demonstrations that it is possible to write good prose and still be a terrific proponent of the genre. I also took note of the fact that he didn't just write one series of novels, but also standalones and a second series, showing that you can write different kinds of books and still take your readers with you."

Val's previous novel, *The Retribution*, was the latest in the Tony Hill/Carol Jordan series, and quite frankly I thought it was impossible to beat. But in *The Vanishing Point* she sets herself a formidable challenge: to wrap her plot around a reality TV star and foul-mouthed bigot, trying to make her both interesting and sympathetic to the reader. I asked Val if it was the sheer challenge of this task that

motivated her, and how she managed to get into the skin of such a dislikeable character. She said that, as always, what drives her is the story. *"With standalones, that is the first consideration because I'm not limited by the capabilities of existing characters. I can figure out what the story is and how to tell it before I have to start thinking about the characters whose story it is. When I come to considering them, I have an idea of how I need them to behave for the story to work, so I have to dig deep into my database of human life to make them credible in terms of their histories, their personalities, their attributes and their reactions. It really doesn't make much difference to me whether the character is 'good' or 'bad'. It's the same process and has to stand up to the same tests of authenticity. And it's great fun!"*

I COULDN'T RESIST the obvious, and asked whether Val was secretly addicted to reality TV. She insisted she was not, though admitted to being fascinated by the very first series of Big Brother, *"because there had never been a show like that before and nobody really knew how to behave. It had a certain raw honesty to it. But I'm not interested in the posturing and desperation that accompanies a lot of reality TV."*

In *The Vanishing Point* the TV star, Scarlett Higgins, undergoes several major tragedies in her life, including a troubled childhood, a philandering druggie boyfriend, and breast cancer. I pointed out that many readers might think she simply got what she deserved, and asked whether Val

agreed. But she resisted such a facile description of her character: *"I think life is more nuanced than that,"* she said. *"There's something to be said for someone who drags herself out of a ghetto life with zero possibilities, even if the route she takes is not one that appeals to us."*

The protagonist in *The Vanishing Point* is a ghost writer documenting Scarlett's life, and Val's account of the ghost writer's world is very revealing about her craft. I asked her what she based her account on, and whether she'd ever ghosted for another person. *"I've never ghosted,"* she replied, *"though I did sometimes work on celebrity 'buy-ups' when I was a journalist, which involved being with a soap star 24/7 for a couple of weeks. But those were clearly presented as interviews. I do have a couple of friends who are ghost writers,"* she added, *"and they were both very generous with their experiences at the sharp end."*

ALTHOUGH SHE BEGAN her writing career as a journalist, in *The Vanishing Point* Val is critical of the way the paparazzi tries to wheedle their way into people's private lives. I asked her whether the ethical issues confronting journalists were one reason she left the profession to become a novelist. She insisted that she left journalism principally because she had always seen it as simply a way station to being a full-time writer of fiction, but added that *"It's also true that I had become increasingly disillusioned with the relentless slide into the gutter of what had been a pretty respectable tabloid press. People*

often forget that before the 1980s, tabloid newspapers in the UK did a decent job of conveying news in an entertaining manner to working class readerships."

Moving from her latest book to the body of her work I noted that Val is rapidly becoming an institution: her work has been translated into more than thirty languages, over ten million copies of her books have been sold world-wide, and having garnered so many awards (including the CWA's Gold Dagger and the Diamond Dagger for lifetime contribution to crime writing) it's fair to say that she is one of the founding figures of Tartan Noir. I asked her whether she thought Scottish crime fiction (or crime fiction in general) is evolving, and if so, in what direction. *"If there's one truth about contemporary crime fiction," she noted, "it is that it's constantly evolving, and generally in several directions at once. Inevitably, not all of these evolutions will be to everyone's taste. It's always been thus. Much of the American pulp fiction that is now idolized was pretty much despised at the time it was written, for example. So while it's true that there is a strand of contemporary crime fiction that seems to embrace graphic violence, that's far from being the only direction the genre is moving in. If you don't like that strand, there are plenty of other options available. And not so much of the institution"* she added archly.

"In my head, I'm still a Young Turk!"

I persisted, asking Val who she finds most engaging among emerging crime writers. She noted that *"Most years, I chair the New Blood panel at the Harrogate Crime Writing Festival and that gives me the opportunity to get first read of a wide swathe of debut authors. Among those who have most impressed me in recent years are Belinda Bauer, David Mark, Attica Locke and MJ McGrath. Among others, I'd include Charles Cumming, Gillian Flynn, Megan Abbott and Caro Ramsay. I could go on..."*

BUT OUR TIME WAS QUICKLY DRAWING TO A CLOSE, and so I asked Val about her next project. *"The next book will be a Tony & Carol novel," she said. "And I'm also working on a very different project—a contemporary re-working of Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey."* And with that teasing suggestion, she was gone. Val always did know how to leave her audience wanting more.

The Vanishing Point is a tautly-drawn, disturbing tale of ambition, deceit, and broken dreams. In the best tradition of psychological thrillers, it is also full of twists and turns, and Val does not flinch from her shocking ending, which leaves readers to reflect on the tarnished morality of our times.

Jim Napier is a crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January* magazine, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine*.

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