



How did I get here?

Ann Cleeves: The rewards of crime

Ann Cleeves grew up in North Devon. She has worked as bird observatory cook, women's refuge leader, probation officer and auxiliary coastguard. She started writing when she lived with her ornithologist husband on Hilbre, an otherwise uninhabited island in the Dee estuary. Most of her novels are set in Northumberland, the county she thinks of as home. Her short film for Border TV, *Catching Birds*, won a Royal Television Society award. She has twice been short listed for a CWA Dagger Award - once for her short story *The Plater*, and the following year for the Dagger in the Library award. In 2006 she won the Duncan Lawrie Dagger Award for best crime novel of the year for *Raven Black*, the first volume of her Shetland Quartet. She is reader-in-residence for Theakston's Old Peculier Harrogate Crime Writing Festival and runs its celebrated outreach programme.

I should be a wealthy woman

I've written nineteen crime novels and had books in print since I was first published twenty years ago. Popular in America, titles have also been translated into a smattering of European languages. For at least five years, I've been in the top band for public lending right. One series has been optioned for television and a short story is in the process of being adapted into a feature film by a hugely successful production company. I've just been offered a new three book deal by Pan Macmillan, a mainstream publisher. So, I should be a wealthy woman, shouldn't I? Comfortable, at least, able to live off my writing?

Well, not quite. Writing is a precarious business. The latest offer from Macmillan is the first time I've been given money before even starting a book. It's quite possible to spend a year on a novel, then find your publisher hates it and refuses to take it. And those six figure advances

which hit the press every so often? They only make the news because they're so unusual. Many authors, whose names you recognise, whose books appear in libraries and bookshops, still receive an advance of £3000 or less. The situation is even more stressful for short story writers, poets and people published by small presses. The independent publishers often don't offer any advance at all and their authors are dependent on a trickle of royalties.

I started writing when I lived with my husband on Hilbre, a tiny tidal island in the Dee Estuary. We were the only residents so there were few distractions. It would never have occurred to me to join a creative writing class or writers' group - I just wouldn't have had the nerve to talk about my work. Sending it away to an anonymous publisher - who probably wouldn't even read it - was much less scary. When the letter arrived accepting it for publication, I couldn't believe writing could be that easy. Of course it wasn't. That was twenty years ago, but it's only been

very recently that I've achieved any sort of market recognition.

The business of writing

Why are things so difficult? Because publishing companies are businesses and it makes more sense to them to put marketing money behind the guaranteed best sellers. The budget for promoting big name authors is enormous and there's little left over for those of us who are euphemistically called 'mid-listers.' Because bookshops have limited shelf space and they're only prepared to stock titles they know will sell, especially if publishers are paying for face on display, point of sale publicity or a three for two deal.

This isn't to say that if you're not Ian Rankin or Wayne Rooney you should just give up. There are wonderful editors, publicists and reps who work round the system with imagination and flair. An enthusiastic editor has been an articulate advocate for my recent books and has made a huge difference to my fortunes. However, it does make sense for mid-list authors to take some responsibility for their own promotion and to make an effort to reach readers.

Unless an individual writer has the skin of a crocodile and an ego the size of Mars, this can be toe-curlingly embarrassing. *I'm* not even sure my books are any good. How can I persuade a bookseller, a journalist, or a library user that they're brilliant? However, I'm more than happy to rave about the latest book by one of my friends. Come together as a group and suddenly promotion is easier. And that's the theory behind Murder Squad.

Murder Squad

Murder Squad was the brain child of Margaret Murphy. Like many crime writers, she was receiving impressive reviews but disappointing sales. She asked six of her friends – including me – if we'd be interested in forming a collective

to promote our work. We started off with a brochure, but quickly moved on to doing gigs in libraries and festivals, running readers' and writers' workshops. Then came the short story anthology and a CD. Of course, we have a website and send out regular e-newsletters.

Murder Squad hasn't made us all overnight bestsellers but it has raised our profile. The events and workshops provide a little extra income. More importantly, the group acts as a support network for its members. Writing is a solitary activity. Especially at the start, it's hard to build up helpful contacts or to pin down how the business works. Within Murder Squad we share ideas, leads and gossip. We seldom all meet, but most days we exchange emails. We've become close friends. If we're offered an event, the two or three of us with a book out most recently will generally get first pick. It's good to have more than one speaker. The audience gets a better idea of the range of contemporary crime fiction. And on those dreadful days when we turn up to a bookshop gig to find one bored assistant and three people sheltering from the rain, at least there's someone to go to the pub with afterwards.

We're very proud that the Murder Squad concept has been copied. Now there are at least half a dozen crime writers' collectives, from The Unusual Suspects to The Mediaeval Murderers. Fantasy has its Write Fantastic. And even literary authors have adopted the model and come together to tour and promote their own work.

However, even with the support of Murder Squad, most of us have to supplement our income in other ways. Only those with frugal habits, a pension, or a sympathetic partner with a regular income, can afford to be a full time writer of novels. In the past I've worked in a variety of fields. I trained as a social worker and started out as a probation officer – great experience for an aspiring crime writer! I've been a child care officer, woman's refuge leader, bird observatory cook and auxiliary coastguard. Now though, most of my work is in the field of reader

development, and I'm experiencing fiction in a completely different way. I love it.

Developing readers

It started in 1999, the National Year of Reading. There was a new enthusiasm for promoting fiction within libraries, encouraged by a training initiative called Branching Out. A number of library authorities in the north east came together to appoint three readers in residence. My patch was Cumbria, Northumberland and North Tyneside. I only worked part time and it seemed an impossible task to cover such a huge geographical area, but it was great. It's a privilege to bring people together to share their enthusiasm about books. I remember one woman at the first meeting of the Cullercoats book group. 'Eh pet,' she said. 'I'm greedy for reading.' That summed up the year for me.

Before starting our residencies, we were sent on a training day organised by Opening the Book. It was very helpful and it began a relationship with Rachel and Olive from the company which still continues. When they set up *Inside Books*, a pilot reader development project in prisons, they invited me to be reader in residence in two institutions in the north of England. I worked in HMP Preston and Low Newton, a women's prison in County Durham. It was fascinating. I was surprised by the range of fiction the offenders enjoyed and I developed an interest in working with people who had literacy problems but who loved stories.

At the end of *Inside Books*, I continued to freelance for Opening the Book as an associate trainer. I've travelled all over the country running Reader Friendly Library sessions for front line library staff. I don't think there's anything quite as exhausting as holding the attention of 30 questioning, challenging staff for a day. But there's nothing quite as rewarding too. And as a writer, it's immensely useful to get feedback from the people who know far more about books than I ever will.

My future in reader development was sealed when I joined Kirklees Libraries to job share their Reader Development Officer post. Now I set up reading groups, organise author events and make funding bids to allow us to run more long-term and imaginative projects. The most recent project – *InterCrime* – has aimed to make translated crime fiction more widely available and read. We've commissioned exciting promotional material, held events in libraries and now local travel agents are giving out booklists to European travellers. I'm sure my own writing has been influenced by reading the wonderful Scandinavian authors on the list. The emphasis on the integrity of character, on place and the crisp, sharp style has made me consider my books in a fresh light.

Even with the security of the Kirklees job, I find it difficult to turn down interesting work. I love being reader-in-residence for the Harrogate Crime Writing Festival and look forward to the weekend in July when writers and readers get together to celebrate the best in crime fiction. Each year we run a different outreach programme. I've devised murder mysteries in rural village halls, explored the wilds of North Yorkshire on the county's mobile libraries, run writers' workshops in primary schools and – best of all – established reading groups in ten pubs in the Dales.

Working in reader development can be frustrating for a writer. There are certainly times when I wish someone else would put the same effort into promoting my books as I do in persuading readers to try other people's. But it forces me to read much more widely than I otherwise would. And there's no better training for a writer.

Would I recommend crime as a genre for a new writer? Absolutely. The range of crime fiction is so broad that instead of being a strait-jacket, the form is liberating. It's possible to write within the conventions or to subvert them. And despite my complaints, crime does still sell.

April 2006

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Useful links

Ann Cleeves' website
www.anncleeves.com

Murder Squad
A collective of seven crime writers from the North of England.
www.murdersquad.co.uk

The Crime Writers' Association
Membership organisation supporting professional writers of crime fiction and non-fiction.
www.thecwa.co.uk

Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)
The leading professional body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers.
www.cilip.org.uk

NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)
The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.
www.nald.org

Opening the Book
The leading provider of training and consultancy in reader development for libraries.
www.openingthebook.com

The Reading Agency
Aims to inspire a reading nation by working in new ways with readers, writers, libraries and their partners.
www.readingagency.org.uk

Theakston's Old Peculier Harrogate Crime Writing Festival
Annual festival in July which features a 'creative day' for aspiring crime writers.
www.harrogate-festival.org.uk/crime/

Writers in Prison Network

Puts writers and creative artists into prisons to deliver creative writing, drama, video, music, oral storytelling, journalism, creative reading and publishing programmes.
www.writersinprisonnetwork.org