



How did I get here?

John Williams: Puffins, serpents and punk rock – a writing life

John Williams was born in Cardiff in 1961. He wrote a punk fanzine and played in bands before moving to London and becoming a journalist, writing for everyone from *The Face* to the *Financial Times*. He wrote his first book, an American crime fiction travelogue called *Into The Badlands* (Paladin) in 1991. His next book, *Bloody Valentine* (HarperCollins), written around the Lynette White murder case in the Cardiff docks, came out in 1994. Following a subsequent libel action from the police, he turned to fiction. His first novel the London-set *Faithless* (Serpent's Tail) came out in 1997. Shortly afterward he moved back to Cardiff, with his family, and has now written four novels set in his hometown – *Five Pubs, Two Bars And A Nightclub* (Bloomsbury 1999); *Cardiff Dead* (Bloomsbury 2000); *The Prince Of Wales* (Bloomsbury 2003) and *Temperance Town* (Bloomsbury 2004). He has edited an anthology of new Welsh fiction, *Wales Half Welsh* (Bloomsbury 2004). He also writes screenplays (his ninety-minute drama, *A Light In The City*, was shown by BBC Wales in 2001). An omnibus edition of his Cardiff novels, *The Cardiff Trilogy*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2006.

Starting out in punk rock

I've been writing professionally for the last twenty years. For the first ten years most of my income came from journalism and non-fiction books. Over the last ten years I've made most of my living from writing novels and short stories, and have also done some screenwriting. I've also been responsible for commissioning a list of crime and noir fiction for the publisher Serpent's Tail. Throw in the occasional lecture or festival reading, and the even more occasional bout of teaching creative writing, and that's the mortgage paid. Most months.

Like most writers, I started out as a reader. As a child I read constantly – anything published by Puffin, almost everything written by Enid Blyton (give or take the odd girls' school series),

followed by all sorts of books, from Agatha Christie to Homer. My ambition as a child was to write children's fiction. Oddly enough though, and unlike a lot of writers, I actually did very little creative writing as a child, except for school compositions.

As a teenager I turned towards rock'n'roll in general and punk rock in particular. During this period, I confined my reading to the NME. I wanted to be a musician but, dimly aware of my lack of talent, was prepared to settle for being a rock journalist instead. In the end I had a go at both. Punk rock's cult of amateurism allowed me to play guitar and sing in a band for a while and even record a single, and meanwhile I wrote and produced a punk fanzine in collusion with a friend from school.

Gradually, as punk rock fizzled away, I found work in libraries and bookshops. I had another go at cracking the music scene in the eighties with a hip-hop folk ensemble which oddly failed to reach the charts, but attracted some favourable reviews. At that point, it finally dawned on me that my musical career was at an end, and aged twenty five or so, I decided that maybe it was time to go back to the one thing I had shown some talent at: writing.

I came up with a plan

By this time, I'd turned back to reading and was a devout fan of the new wave of American crime fiction, as practised by the likes of Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy. Inspired by them, I started work on a novel set in the music world, seeing as that was what I knew. I wrote a few chapters and then paused for thought. For one thing I wasn't sure if it was much good. For a second thing I had no idea how I would even begin to go about getting it published even if I did eventually finish it.

So for once in my life I came up with a practical plan. I decided that I should begin by trying to become a journalist. It would help with my writing and allow me to meet people in the publishing business. Then I would try to publish a book of non-fiction. And if I managed to do that then, I figured, someone might be prepared to look at a novel.

Once the plan was set up, it was just a matter of getting started. I approached various music magazines with no luck – after all, the world is full of young men who think they know about music. So I turned to my other major interest of the time, American crime fiction. I wrote a short review of a new crime novel (*New Hope For The Dead* by Charles Willeford) on spec and sent it to various people. One of these was an acquaintance who worked on the New Musical Express and had become its books editor (during a curious period when the NME had a books editor).

This turned out to be my big break. The editor had actually commissioned a review of this same book a few weeks earlier, but the writer hadn't delivered it. When my review showed up, reasonably literate and the right length, he put it in the magazine.

Suddenly I was a journalist! I wrote more book reviews for the NME, and then approached the Face magazine, which was very trendy at the time. Again, I was lucky with my timing, and ended up becoming their books columnist. A year or so later a publisher who had read my Face columns took me out to lunch and wondered whether I had ever considered writing a book. The plan seemed to be working out better than I ever expected.

Finally, I was a novelist

After the meeting, I went off, brainstormed, and came up with an idea – I would travel around America interviewing crime novelists and writing about my impressions of the cities they described. The result would be a mixture of travel book and lit crit. I asked around and got names of possible agents, phoned three of them with this idea, and found one who was prepared to take me on. She approached half a dozen publishers with an outline, and three of them bid on it. We accepted the best offer, from a major publisher, and on the proceeds of the advance, I headed off to America to write *Into The Badlands*, my first book. It was all going like clockwork.

I had another go at a novel then, but it still wasn't quite working so I continued with my non-fiction career. My next book was a true crime account of a murder in Cardiff, my home town, called *Bloody Valentine*. It incorporate a few fictionalised passages, and persuaded me that maybe I was now ready to concentrate on my fiction writing (particularly as I was sued for libel by the police over *Bloody Valentine* – fiction seemed a lot safer all of a sudden).

My first novel was an updated version of the music scene book I'd started a decade before. It was called *Faithless* and it was a harder sell than my non-fiction, but I did manage to get a deal for it at the small independent publisher Serpent's Tail. Finally, I was able to call myself a novelist.

One thing struck me at this point. *Faithless* was a short book that had taken me years to write. This was because I'd always been looking for free weeks to devote to working on it, and when you're a freelance writer, free weeks are a rare commodity. I realised I had to have a more efficient writing routine, so I started getting up between six and seven in the morning and writing fiction till nine. In those two or three hours I would demand of myself that I produced at least 500 words. In that way, I reasoned, I should be able to produce a book every year or so. And so, more or less, it has proved.

From reviewing books to commissioning them

Around this same time I also decided that I had to cut down on the amount of book reviewing I was doing (anything up to 20 books a month). And one thing that had started to strike me was how little interesting British crime fiction was being published. I felt sure that there must be other young British writers like me out there trying to write something closer to Elmore Leonard than P.D. James. And rather than keeping on reviewing books I didn't think were much cop, I thought it would be more fulfilling to get involved in publishing books that were some cop. So I called up Pete Ayrton, who runs Serpent's Tail, and suggested that I commission a crime fiction list for him. Once again my timing was good and Pete agreed to try it out for few months, paying me on a freelance basis, and seeing what happened. At first things were slow but gradually, over the ensuing decade, I've been involved in discovering, editing and publishing a whole lot of what I think is the most interesting British crime and noir fiction around

(including work by writers like Joolz Denby, David Peace, Nichols Blincoe and Ken Bruen).

This shift in direction did indeed help me to focus on my own writing, and I followed *Faithless* up with a book called *Five Pubs Two Bars And A Nightclub*, directly inspired by the people I met while researching *Bloody Valentine*. This time Bloomsbury came in with a decent offer and I started a relationship with them which was extended for three more books, all of them set, like *Five Pubs*, in my hometown of Cardiff (the first three of them are currently being repackaged in one volume as *The Cardiff Trilogy*).

Opportunities for Welsh writers

For the first ten years or so of my writing career I was living in London, which at the time, pre-internet and email, was more or less essential for a freelance journalist. Since 1998, when my second novel came out, I've been living back in Cardiff. This has plenty of advantages, both in terms of a calmer pace of life and because I now have a place to write about that I can call my own. It also has disadvantages, inasmuch as the distance from the metropolitan publishing world can on more paranoid days, make one feel rather cut adrift and out of the loop.

Overall, however, I think it's been largely advantageous to be in Wales, not only in terms of the quality of life, but in terms of the opportunities available to Welsh writers. I've been lucky enough to receive two writing bursaries from the Welsh Academy (Academi) to help with works in progress. I've also had quite a bit of film and TV interest in my books, which has definitely been helped by their having a distinctive regional setting. One original 90 minute TV drama I wrote did get made, and while proposed TV series based on my books have ended up coming to nought as yet, I have been well paid for writing scripts.

Have a story you want to tell

Do I have any advice? Pick a time of day when you are undisturbed, write regularly, and give yourself a minimum word count per day. If you do, you'll find that there's no such thing as writer's block. Write something you enjoy, something you'd like to read yourself. And do consider trying other forms of writing. Journalism, for instance, will make you a better writer and broaden your experience.

As for writing manuals, courses and so on? Well, it's hard for me to say as I have never taken advantage of them myself. For better or worse, my writing is essentially the product of my reading colliding with my imagination. Any technique had been learned by reading and trial and error. However, since I've done a little creative writing teaching, I have read a few books in the area and I would unreservedly recommend Stephen King's *On Writing* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001). . In the end, though, all that really matters is that you have a story you want to tell. If you do, well, just go for it, and good luck!

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Useful links

Academi

The Welsh National Literature Promotion Agency and Society for Authors with responsibility for a range of writer services. www.academi.org

BBC Wales Writers Unit

Offers a scriptreading service for new and experienced writers in Wales who want to write for TV and radio in English and Welsh. http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/writing/submissions_other_wales.shtml

The Crime Writers' Association

Supports professional writers of crime fiction and non-fiction.

www.thecwa.co.uk

National Union of Journalists

The trade union for journalists in the UK and Ireland. NUJ Training (www.nujtraining.org.uk) offers information and advice on careers and training in journalism.

www.nuj.org.uk

National Council for the Training of Journalists

Publishes an online directory of accredited journalism courses and runs the one-day course, *Successful Freelancing*.

www.nctj.com

Serpent's Tail

Renowned British independent book publisher of international fiction and non-fiction.

<http://www.serpentstail.com/>

The Society of Authors

Represents the interests of professional writers, writing in all areas of the profession.

www.societyofauthors.org

Story

Information, tips and advice for writers including details of magazines that will accept short stories, competitions and workshops.

www.theshortstory.org.uk

The Welsh Books Council

National body providing a focus for the publishing industry in Wales.

www.clc.org.uk

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media.

www.writersguild.org.uk

writernet

Provides dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers.

www.writernet.org.uk