



McDermid, Val (b. 1955)

by Linda Rapp

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Prolific Scottish mystery writer Val McDermid has three very successful series of novels and has been the recipient of numerous awards for crime fiction. Several of her works have been adapted for television.

Val McDermid comes from Fife in the coal-mining region of eastern Scotland. She was born on June 4, 1955 in the town of Kirkcaldy and grew up there. An only child, she was frequently in the company of adults or off on her own, sometimes spending whole days abroad in the countryside with only her dog for company. Her parents were of the working class, but they realized the value of a good education and also strongly encouraged their daughter to read as much as possible. Because of her love of books McDermid "developed a secret life of the imagination" at an early age.

McDermid recalls feeling "different" as a child but at first attributed the sentiment to her desire to become a writer, which indeed was a far cry from the typical occupations in her small hometown. Eventually she came to understand her sexual orientation, and her relatives proved supportive when she came out to them. "When I realized I was gay, no one stopped speaking to me," she said. "I wasn't cast adrift for bringing disgrace and shame upon the family."

The school system in Fife saw McDermid as different in another way--as a student of exceptional promise. She was selected for the "1E" program, in which one or two outstanding pupils per year were advanced a grade and taught in a special class. McDermid found this beneficial in that it gave her "a lifelong habit of hard work and the expectation of success," but because the "1E" children were set apart from their peers, it also "left her with an abiding sense of being an outsider."

Because of her academic success, McDermid was accepted by Oxford University at sixteen, one of the youngest students ever admitted. She studied in St. Hilda's College there, earning a bachelor's degree in English in 1975.

After graduation she embarked on a career in journalism. She started at the *Plymouth and South Devon Times*, where she won the National Trainee Journalist of the Year award in 1977.

McDermid returned to Scotland to write for the *Daily Record* in Glasgow. After a few years, however, she moved back to England to join the staff of the *Sunday People* in Manchester, a publication that had a good reputation for its investigative reporting.

McDermid spent about a decade with the *Sunday People* but eventually became dissatisfied with the direction that the paper had taken. "I saw it change from an investigative newspaper with good human interest stories into another one of the gutter press," she commented. McDermid quit her job as a journalist in 1991, but by that time she was already a published novelist.



Top: A portrait of Val McDermid by Alan Peebles.

Above: A portrait by Mimsy Moller. Courtesy Office of Val McDermid. www.valmcdermid.com

Of her first novel, which she wrote at twenty-one, McDermid, with characteristic humor, would later remark that "the best thing I can say about it is that I actually finished it." Publishers were not impressed, but at the suggestion of an actor friend, she made it into a play, *Like a Happy Ending*, that was included in the Plymouth Theatre Company's series of new plays by new writers. She adapted it again for BBC radio in 1981 and subsequently penned two more radio plays, *Clean Break* (1998) and *The Right Chemistry* (1999).

McDermid, however, continued to aspire to write novels. She calls reading Sara Paretsky's first mystery novel "the defining moment" for her because it was "a mystery with an urban setting that dealt with contemporary women's lives, that didn't shy away from engaging with the politics of the society it reflected, and that was fun."

She began writing her first crime novel in 1984. McDermid chose to make her lesbian sleuth Lindsay Gordon a reporter because, she said, "I had no idea how police investigate a murder, but I knew how journalists do their job." The response to *Report for Murder* upon its publication in 1987 was, in McDermid's wry words, "a resounding silence."

Undeterred, she brought Gordon back in her next two books. There are at present five mysteries in the Lindsay Gordon series, but McDermid realized that she "was never going to make a living out of lesbian crime fiction." She introduced her second detective, heterosexual private investigator Kate Brannigan, in *Dead Beat* in 1992 and has written five more novels in that series.

McDermid's third series features the crime-solving team of psychologist and profiler Dr. Tony Hill and police detective Carol Jordan. The debut novel for the pair, *The Mermaids Singing* (1995), was a great success and earned McDermid the prestigious Crime Writers Association's Gold Dagger Award.

Mermaids and its sequel, *The Wire in the Blood* (1997), served as the basis for a six-part BBC television series also entitled *The Wire in the Blood* in 2002. McDermid worked with the writers on the adaptation and had a cameo role--as a journalist--in one of the episodes. McDermid's award-winning *A Place of Execution* (1999) is under development by BBC Wales as a television film.

In addition to her series books, McDermid has published three stand-alone mysteries, a collection of short stories, and a nonfiction work, *A Suitable Job for a Woman* (1994), a compilation of interviews with female American private investigators.

McDermid has explained that the ideas for her mysteries may come from anywhere--"a detail in a news story, an item on the radio, a throwaway line in a conversation"--to which she applies "the writer's secret weapon . . . the two magic words 'What if?'" Although she may use an actual event as a starting point for a story, she stresses that she has no desire to write "true crime" books. "The problem with real life is that it's messy and untidy and the dramatic climaxes never work themselves out neatly enough to be entirely satisfying," she notes.

Once McDermid has a plot idea in mind she decides whether it fits with one of her series detectives or demands stand-alone treatment. A major impetus for launching the Kate Brannigan series was McDermid's realization that *Dead Beat* "wasn't a story that [Lindsay Gordon] could tell."

McDermid believes that characterization is of great importance in a detective novel. She points out that readers know that fictional crimes and their solutions do not accurately reflect what happens in real life, and so the mystery writer must create characters with whom readers will want to go "on a journey that can sometimes be emotionally and intellectually exhausting."

McDermid also feels that the contemporary "crime novel is no longer merely an intellectual puzzle" and that readers should enjoy "the unfolding of the story" and the way that the characters react within it. She emphasizes the need for a strong, well-developed plot in a mystery but says that "plot and character should

operate as a kind of biofeedback system."

McDermid, like fellow Scottish mystery novelists Ian Rankin and Denise Mina, writes in a style that has been called "tartan noir." Part of the darkness in McDermid's books resides in the depiction of violence, from which she does not shrink. She feels that a writer of detective stories, although working in the realm of fiction and imagination, has "a moral responsibility not to minimize the suffering of real victims."

As for the perpetrators, McDermid has stated that she does not think that evil is "some abstract force" but rather that "such behavior is a product of individual experience and social conditions" and that the "same person exposed to a different set of circumstances would act in very different ways." She believes in "the possibility of personal redemption," which is among the reasons that she is "profoundly opposed to the death penalty."

Though out and proud, McDermid put a gay sexual predator in her 2004 novel *The Torment of Others*, drawing criticism from some glbtq readers. "There's good and bad in every community," she commented. "To pretend otherwise only gives ammunition to your enemies."

In 2000 McDermid added a new line to her résumé, that of "mum," which has brought great joy to her life. Her then partner, a solicitor, conceived their son, Cameron, through artificial insemination, and immediately after his birth McDermid obtained joint parenting rights through court order.

The couple eventually broke up, and Cameron now divides his time between his two mothers' homes. McDermid calls the arrangement "civilized" and emphasizes that the parents put their son's welfare first.

McDermid's new partner is an American publisher.

Over the course of her career McDermid has won many of the prestigious honors in the crime fiction field, including the Sherlock, Macavity, Barry, Anthony, and Dilys Awards.

The prolific writer will soon have two more books on her long list of publications. *Stranded*, a collection of short fiction, is scheduled to come out in spring 2005 in the United Kingdom and in autumn in the United States. Her next novel, *The Grave Tattoo*, a psychological thriller, is also slated for release in the fall.

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