

Hello everyone. It's a great pleasure to be here. Thank you, Janet and the committee, for inviting me.

I usually see Fenna when we meet at the annual St Hilda's Crime & Mystery weekend in Oxford, so it's lovely to be here on Fenna's home ground. Thanks for the hospitality.

In 1814, Ivan Krylok wrote a story called *The Inquisitive Man* about a person in a museum who notices lots of tiny objects but somehow doesn't see the Elephant. Dostoevsky and Mark Twain took up the notion and the phrase became proverbial - the Elephant in the room; the thing we don't talk about. I won't spoil the party by naming that elephant. I will just say I believe we are better together, better together than apart.

And after all, we're writers. We have so much in common.

I'm going to talk about the crime writing scene in the UK, including my own work. I'll say something about our organisations, conferences and the issues that come up for us.

In May, July, August and September there are crime writing and Historical Novel Society conferences in Bristol, Harrogate, Oxford and different Scottish cities.

At CrimeFest, there are 'Spotlight' sessions. Individuals have 20 minutes to talk on a topic close to their hearts.

I attended a very popular Spotlight session presented by Katharina Hall, Associate Professor of German at Swansea University.

Professor Hall was there to promote the book that she has edited, *Crime Fiction in German, Der Krimi*, published by the University of Wales Press in 2016.

She made the session great fun. Each person was given a numbered ticket on entry - a raffle ticket. There was a draw for prizes, including one lucky winner of *Crime Fiction in German*. I was that lucky winner. It was such a good omen.

When Fenna asked me if I would like to be a guest at your conference, I jumped at the opportunity to meet my sibling crime writers.

Now I should say something about my books. Do we love talking about our books, or do we hate it? Or both. Jean Cocteau said that a writer talking about writing is like a plant talking about horticulture. Does anyone else have that nagging feeling that if they spend too much time being The Writer, the good fairy will fly away.

My books are set in 1920s Yorkshire, beginning in 1922. My character is Kate Shackleton, a First World War widow turned sleuth. She lives in the City of Leeds, as I do. The first book, *Dying in the Wool*, was

published in 2009. The ninth in the series, *Death in the Stars*, came out two months ago. Kate is fiercely independent. She's a great character to write about.

In *Dying in the Wool*, her first professional investigation, Kate is employed by a friend to discover the whereabouts of her father, a millionaire mill owner who went missing in 1917.

Before I turned to crime writing, I wrote historical novels set during the early part of the last century. The first was based on my mother's stories. Julia was orphaned at the age of eleven when she lost her mother, an Irish Catholic, and her father, a German Jew, and her life was hard.

Publishers classify family and personal stories as sagas. My heroines in the sagas never had any money. It was a great pleasure to be able to give my detective, Kate, a private income and her own car.

I also went house hunting for her and found a solidly built house that backs onto a wood. While I was walking about the wood, I met the current occupant of Kate's house. I explained to her that my character was going to live in her house, but wouldn't be in the way because Kate's occupation of the property would be during the 1920s.

I was angling for an invitation to go into the house and look around. The owner did not invite me in. I believe she was a little suspicious of me.

Afterwards, I was glad not to have gone inside because I am able to imagine the house as Kate would have furnished and decorated it.

Kate has a housekeeper, Mrs Sugden, and an assistant, Jim Sykes. Mr Sykes is a former policeman. Kate needs his help because in 1922 there were still places that a woman simply could not go. One of those places was the Bradford Wool Exchange where textile millionaires wore silk top hats and their Rolls Royce motor cars were driven by chauffeurs. Women were not allowed to enter the Wool Exchange. I suppose they did enter, but only late at night or early in the morning with brushes, mops and buckets.

The story is set on the outskirts of Bradford, nicknamed "Wool City" because it was the centre of the world's wool trade.

During the industrial revolution, Bradford was the fastest growing city in the UK. There was a strong German presence in Bradford. Fine warehouses were built in an area still known as Little Germany. German merchants built a concert hall, St George's Hall. European merchants came to buy wool and sell cloth all over the world. German dyers and colourists were predominant in the industry until the eve of the First World War.

The second novel in the Kate Shackleton series, *A Medal for Murder*, is set in Harrogate. This is where the Theakstons Old Peculier Crime Festival is held every July at the Old Swan Hotel. The sponsors, Theakstons, is a brewery and Old Peculier is one of their beers. Theakstons Festival claims to be the largest crime festival in the world. I'm privileged to have been invited to speak there twice.

The Old Swan Hotel is a fitting venue for a crime festival because it was where Agatha Christie was spotted after she mysteriously went missing in 1926.

Harrogate has a reputation for gentility. It is said that the town sign ought to read, "You are entering Harrogate. Please wipe your feet"<sup>1</sup>. In the nineteenth century, when there was talk of the railway coming to Harrogate, there were strong local objections. People feared that hordes would come on the trains from Leeds and Bradford and would walk about the streets, eating their sandwiches in public.

Using a local setting has a great advantage. Yorkshire is a very varied county, of former industrial cities, market towns, villages, seaside towns, and stunning landscapes.

I've been very fortunate with the Kate Shackleton mysteries. In writing, just as in life, there's a great deal of luck involved. When the first two novels were on the shelves, a bookseller said to me:

"If you'd written these books a few years ago, there would have been no interest."

Readers wouldn't have wanted to know about the 1920s, or a young female detective. Luckily for me, the timing was right. For once in my life, I was fashionable. It won't last!

In the May edition of the *Historical Novels Review*, Myfanwy Cook wrote an article called "A Starring Role - Female Detectives Take Centre Stage."

Myfanwy writes that although the first female detectives made an appearance in the mid nineteenth century, it is only over the last twenty years that new female detectives have begun to flourish in historical crime fiction. They have become strong contenders for the most popular historical crime fiction characters.

Female detectives are generally good company. They go about their business with grace, competence and a sense of humour.

I think they're not just good company for the reader but for the writer too. I suppose some of us have a sort of symbiotic relationship with our characters.

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<sup>1</sup> Racing Pigs and Giant Marrows, Travels Around the North Country Fairs, Harry Pearson

The American author, Sue Grafton, created the alphabet series, A for Alibi, B for Burglary etc. The books feature California private eye Kinsey Millhone. Sue Grafton said of her private eye that they have two souls in one body, and that Kinsey had the better one. She also said that by the time she reached the end of alphabet series, Kinsey Millhone would be real and she, Sue Grafton, would be fictional.

Traditional mysteries, or classic mysteries, such as mine, are frequently called “cosy”, the word having crossed the Atlantic from America. I don’t like the term, but it helps sell books so I don’t complain too much.

There is always what might be termed the “cosy” panel at crime conferences, and attempts to define what cosy means. The sorts of definitions people come up with include, being character based, well-plotted and having a setting with an element of realism. It has been suggested that in cosy crime we think the best of people, and in noir we think the worst. There is a satisfying denouement in a classic mystery which would not be reached in real life – a drive to restore order in a disorderly world.

There’s a huge interest in crime fiction. Crime fiction accounts for more than a third of all fiction published in English and there are more novels in translation and from America being published. We now have so many genres of fiction, sub-genres and cross genres of crime fiction that it can seem overwhelming. We have police procedurals, psychological thrillers, flawed heroes, hard-boiled detectives, traditional mysteries, light-hearted and comic mysteries. That is not counting the literary fiction and speculative fiction that has crime and criminality at its heart.

There are stories for every taste, which is how it should be.

We humans are a story-telling species and long may we go on being so, with all the variety and vibrancy that stories have to offer.

All publishers present menus with a wide flavour of historical and contemporary crime.

In Britain, I believe this popularity is in part due to the existence of the Crime Writers’ Association which came into being in 1953. I’ll talk about that in a moment but first I want to mention the broader organisations that support writers and how I first joined the writers’ union.

My writing life began in radio with short stories – the first about a policeman in Hong Kong. My first play centred on two desperately poor matriarchal families who, in 1612, were accused of witchcraft, found guilty and were hanged. That work gave me the qualification to join the

Writers' Guild of Great Britain, which is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress.

Although the Guild was initially founded by screenwriters, it is thanks Guild members that we receive remuneration for the lending of our works by libraries. The Guild and the Society of Authors campaign on behalf of writers.

Particular campaigns involve supporting public libraries. In the name of "austerity" central government has made swingeing cuts to local government funding leading to library closures and libraries being taken over by volunteers. There's also a campaign to ensure that school libraries are mandatory, not optional.

There are so many organisations that writers can join and from what I've read, I believe it's the same for you.

When my first Kate Shackleton murder mystery was accepted for publication, I joined the Crime Writers' Association. I felt something of a fraud when I found myself in the company of authors who had never dreamed of writing anything other than crime.

The CWA was founded on 5 November, 1953 by the energetic John Creasey. At the end of that year he claimed a membership of sixty. It's said that one third of this membership could be accounted for by John Creasey himself. He wrote under twenty pseudonyms and joined twenty times, using all of his names.

At festivals and in the pages of newspapers and magazines, certain questions come up. When asked at conferences if there are any lines they would not cross, many of my fellow authors say they might have the most terrible deaths in store for their characters but would never hurt an animal.

So what are the taboos? Jessica Mann, a novelist who reviews crime fiction for the *Literary Review* has previously objected to depictions of sadism having increased year on year. To quote: "the victims are often young women and their torments are ever more ingenious and cruel."

I'm with Jessica Mann on this one. The issue of violence towards women formed the subject of a panel discussion at CrimeFest one year. One panellist said she had no wish to read novels in which one young woman after another was brutally murdered. A writer of a novel that depicted such murders defended the books, saying that she believed these explorations allowed women to face their worst fears.

Another topic that comes up for discussion centres on the use of history. Those of us who write historical narratives owe a debt to the real

historians who do the hard work, digging at the coalface of history. It's said that historians can tell us what happened. Novelists can say what it felt like to be alive at a particular moment in history. We can say what life was like. If we do that well enough, no one will contradict.

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