

The Martyn Waites Interview (DVD Extras)

Ray Banks: So I did this interview with Martyn Waites. Trouble is, we had a word limit. And Martyn, see, he don't know the word "limit", and neither do I. So we chatted some more, because I'm interested in the bloke and I know a lot of other people are too. Here's what we talked about, starting with the man's shady past.

You, Mr Waites, were an actor (and still are, as far as I'm aware), so here's the actor-type question. Were you in the following programmes, and if so, what was your role? *The Bill*, *Inspector Morse*, *Spender*, and any others you can think of...

Right. *The Bill* - I was actually short listed for a regular part in that, but didn't get it. I auditioned loads of times for it after that and was eventually cast as someone "helping the police with their enquiries", shall we say. *Inspector Morse* - I was a copper. Got my thumb dislocated by David Haig in a fight. Worked with the guy who went on to direct *Shakespeare In Love* and *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Heady. *Spender* - did a couple of episodes of that as a villain. Very unmemorable. *Badger* - the wildlife detective series with Jerome Flynn. I was a villain again. Something to do with stolen laptops and driving a white van. Can't remember much else. Then *The New Adventures of Robin Hood* for American TV. Brilliant. Made *Xena: Warrior Princess* look Shakespearean by comparison. The only time I'll ever see "Guest Starring Martyn Waites" appearing on a TV show. I was a wrestler. Of course. I was wearing leather and lycra and had a big, long black wig. I looked like a pre-surgery Cher.

You also had a stint at *Bizarre* magazine under the inimitable Cathi Unsworth (*The Not-Knowing*). Tell us heaps about that, because that's mint.

Under Cathi Unsworth? Ooh-er, missus...

Easy, tiger.

Yeah, *Bizarre*... used to be mint, now it's just some generic blokes' wank mag. Cathi was the guiding light behind it when it was in its heyday. You got some great articles in it (honestly) and the book pages were fab (all down to Cathi).

How's this for a bizarre story - I got involved with the mag by filming *The New Adventures of Robin Hood* in Lithuania. I was working with The Shend, a legendary actor who used to be the lead singer with The Cravats and The Very Things, and is now a legendary actor. He also writes for various magazines, including some of Paul Raymond's porn mags and *Bizarre*. We were both playing wrestlers in the episode. I told him I was a novelist, kept in touch, sent him my first couple of novels and he, not being much of a reader, handed them on to Cathi. She declared me the best British crime novelist since Derek Raymond and set up an interview with *Bizarre*. We got on really well and she offered me work as the true crime correspondent. I did all sorts of stuff under that title, from the history of capital punishment in Britain to profiles on various serial killers to reporting on Britain's only crime museum. That kind of thing. Plus book reviews, interviews - anything they paid me for, really. And then it was sold to James Brown - all the good people, including Cathi, left and the rot set in. James Brown ruined it and had to sell it for a huge loss. But still, onwards and upwards...

You worked with young offenders too, didn't you? Can you tell us more about that? And what did you learn from the experience?

God, how long have you got? I worked in a young offenders institution for two-and-a-half years as a writer in residence and it was the best job I ever had. I was really privileged to have the opportunity to affect such a positive change in someone's life. And by using such simple means. A lot of my students won national awards for their writing, which I can't take any credit for – it was all their own work, I just guided them in the right direction. I could write a book about my experience. Really. I hate it when people say things like that (usually ones who have never written a book before), but I honestly could. And it would be brilliant. Because they were.

Working there confirmed every prejudice I had about the criminal justice system in this country. The unfairness, the racism, the bullying... I saw it all, first-hand. And the lads themselves... it really is that nature/nurture argument. No contest. If horrendous things hadn't been done to them, they wouldn't have done horrendous things to others. It really is that simple. I wrote a short story based on the life of one of the kids I met, "Let's Pretend". It was on the Plots With Guns website and I think it was reprinted (*The Adventure of the Missing Detective: And 25 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories!* Eds: Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenburg). It's all about a seventeen-year-old rapist and how he came to be the way he was. Things don't happen in a vacuum. If anyone wants to seek that out, it tells you more than I could rabbiting on here.

While we're being personal: here's the sloppy bit. How much of a role does your wife play in your career?

Ahh... bless... Sloppy bit, indeed. Yes, my wife Linda plays a huge part. Being a theatre costume designer, she's not much of a reader – certainly not of crime fiction – but she's a very good editor. I used to ignore what she said, but when my agent would send back my manuscripts with notes that were word for word what Linda had said I started taking notice. I can now discuss what I'm working on and show her work in progress. She's also my sternest critic, after myself. And she's also very good at sorting out the business stuff. She seems to have a tough line when dealing with publishers and agents – "Don't take any shit from anyone." Surprisingly enough, it's an approach that's worked well. If she could design and maintain websites, she would be perfect!

Talking of websites, I heard you were going to get one. Any news on that?

Not yet. It'll happen, honest. I keep thinking of setting up a blog in the meantime but I really don't think anyone would be the slightest bit interested in what I've got to say. It would be like being accosted by some drunk in the pub that you can't get away from. So I think I might wait until the site's all sorted. It'll probably be a really boring site, too. I don't do very much. Apart from stare out the window, think of ways to torture/kill/maim someone, watch *The Shield* and listen to the Drive By Truckers. Or "writing" as we in the trade call it.

And this “writing” stuff, it’s not confined to books, is it? Tell us about *Cold Harbour*.

Ah. My film that’s going to make me a playa on the global stage. Or not.

For those who don’t know, it’s a pet project that I’ve co-written, a thriller set in the Scarborough fishing industry. No, honestly. I love it, think it’s a great script, even if I do say so myself. We’ve got the locations for free, the equipment to make it, the director and several names attached. All we need is a producer to give us a bit of cash. Not much – we’re not greedy. And we also know how to make a little look like a lot on screen. But at the moment it’s been kind of languishing in development limbo because of other projects we’ve got going. But just today (which will mean nothing for anyone reading this interview whenever), I was talking to Bob Horwell the co-writer and director of the project. We’re going to do a staged reading in London soon and we’ve got a couple of decent-sized names attached to it even at this stage. We’re going to invite all sorts of people along, get them drunk and make them listen to our assembled starry cast make our words sound better than they probably are. Then producers are going to throw money at us and put us on the next train for Scarborough. Then it’s Cannes, Venice, wherever. I’ve always had a good feeling about this. Even though nothing’s happened recently, I’ve never not believed it was going to be made. And made the way we want it to be made. And then I can follow that well-worn route of great writers from Faulkner and Hammett down who went to Hollywood and pissed it all away.

Not that I’m saying I’m as good as them. But I’m from Newcastle, so I bet I can match them pint for pint.

Okay, let’s get right up to the present: *The Mercy Seat* is your first full-on thriller. What prompted you to go Bruckheimer?

Go Bruckheimer? Me? To be honest, I just wanted to do something different. My previous two books, *Born Under Punches* and *The White Room* were very contained, very literary. And I loved them. They were the books I became a writer in order to write. And they hadn’t exactly set the world on fire (for which I blame the publishers not knowing how to promote them. Not their fault, I suppose, they were expecting an Ian Rankin or Mark Billingham type of book - what they got were two slabs of social history.) So they wanted something commercial. Something they could sell. So I watched a few series of *24* to see how you do this plotting kind of thing and there you have it. I still wasn’t sure I was writing a thriller while I was doing it - I just thought it was my usual stuff but a bit more plot driven.

But maybe it’s just a question of subjective perspective. In the UK it was nominated for the Crime Writers Association Ian Fleming Steel Dagger for Best Thriller which surprised me a bit as I didn’t think I’d written a thriller, while in America it’s been nominated for the LA Times Best Crime Novel and sold as noir or at least neo-noir, a term we don’t have in Britain. I don’t really care, as long as it’s out there and people are buying it and reading it.

And why set it in Newcastle?

Because nobody's done it before. And it's a city that really lends itself well to that, I think. Especially now it's gone bright and shiny and 21st Century but still has plenty of shadows behind the façade. And I wanted to write something that was a prevailing corrective to the *Get Carter* image of the North East of England, which most people in London still think it's like. Get a grip. That was thirty-five years ago.

Do you think (as I do) that Newcastle has this weird thing about it, like it's neither Scottish nor English?

You're bang on there. I think I said something about that in one of my books – when you go over one of the bridges over the Tyne, it's like you're entering a totally separate part of the country. Another kingdom and the Tyne's the moat. It's something that a lot of outsiders don't understand (I don't mean you, because you live there), but it's something that stays with you - that sense of separateness, apartness – wherever you go. I live down London way now, and when people talk about England I can't relate that to the place I grew up in and know best. I've never felt English in my life, not once. But *Geordie* – if I have a sense of cultural identity, that's it.

Getting back to the thriller thing: would you say that a majority of thrillers are particularly right-wing in their political thinking? And if so, was this a reason why you decided to have a crack at it, being a bit of a leftie yourself?

I would, most definitely. But I still don't think of myself as a thriller writer. I never read thrillers – it's just blokes with big guns frightening foreigners. Or political thrillers, which I might read if I was an insomniac. But yeah, it's right-wing technoporn. Lots of men getting all sweaty beating each other up, and then the authors' photos show them all posturing with big guns. What's up, guys? Overcompensating, are we? Something about yourselves you're not comfortable with? Something you want to tell us?

The worrying thing is that so many people read that kind of stuff and believe that's the way the world actually is. I didn't feel that being, as you say, a bit of a leftie, I wanted to take on this mentality in a gung-ho fashion – it wasn't that premeditated. I don't think I write thrillers. When I sit down and do it, it doesn't feel like I'm writing a thriller. If anything, I'm a crime writer. Just a crime writer.

Would you say – as a crime writer – that you're more intellectually aware or emotionally aware? By which I mean, are you concerned primarily with plot and character devices, the actual writing; or does the underlying emotion take priority?

That's a really interesting question, and one that preoccupies me quite a lot, especially when it came to writing *The Mercy Seat*. I think my strengths as a writer are always character and atmosphere. Dialogue and description, that kind of thing. I never bother about plot too much. That takes care of itself, usually. I have a premise, which is really the coat hanger I can attach anything I want to and see where it goes. Because those are the kinds of books I like to read. I hate to read anything that's plot-led to the exclusion of all else. Which I suppose is why I don't like thrillers – that kind of writing bores me.

What I tried to do with *The Mercy Seat* was do a book that had all my usual concerns in, that didn't stint on character and atmosphere and dialogue, all the things I love writing, and to see if I could do it within the framework of a strong plot. I seem to have managed. I think this is the first novel that's used both sides of my brain – the intellectual and the emotional. Usually, it's just the emotional.

Your “Secret History” books – *Born Under Punches* and *The White Room* – were two of the best British crime novels of the last five years. Can we expect you to return to history in the future?

Thank you for those kind words. I'm quite fond of those books myself and proud to have written them. Yes, I will be going back to them. The “Secret Histories” will continue, but perhaps not for a while yet. The plan (as much as there is one) is to build up the Donovan series a bit, get that going, then do some alternating. I've got a sequel to *The White Room* in mind already called *The Spirit House*, but that may actually end up as a Donovan novel. I don't know yet. If it's not, it'll be set in the mid-Nineties. And a novel based on a real-life murder case involving police brutality in the Seventies, which I've tentatively called *Angelic Upstart* (there's a big clue in the title). I also keep tinkering with a modern-day pulp-type book set in South London called *Threat Management*. But all these are a long way off, unfortunately. For now, it's the world of Joe Donovan.

The main narrative drive of the Joe Donovan novels is the search for what happened to his son – at some point you'd assume he actually finds out. Which leads me to: do you have a cap on the series? If so, how many books? And how many do you think a series can logically and plausibly pull off before it starts to whiff a bit?

There will be a finite end to the Joe Donovan series, but I don't know when. It depends on a few things – if the publishers want some more books, if readers don't get sick of him, and if I don't get fed up. I think one of the good things about starting this series with my sixth novel is that I've written other kinds of stuff first. It's not that I've just written the one series and nothing else. I know some writers who have done that and they get a bit antsy that they're going to be judged solely on that series. But I did an earlier trilogy with Stephen Larkin and then the two secret histories (with more to follow).

As to how long a series can be – for me, the maximum number has to be ten. It worked for John Harvey's Resnick series. I think the optimum should be seven. Don't know why. Maybe because Chandler did it. There's also a trilogy or a quartet – they've got a nice ring to them. But I don't want to be one of those writers who keeps going after the series has died. Some of the crime series around – it's like *Last of the Summer Wine*. Those characters have been dead or near death since I was at school and they're still going. I don't think the Donovan books will go on longer than ten, but more than three or four. Mainly because the second one, *Bone Machine*, is coming out in January 2007 and I'm currently writing the third. Although I could be wrong. No one may want any more.

Okay, so what's so funny 'bout peace, love and understanding?

Absolutely nothing. But you're asking the wrong person. Get yourself over to Lebanon and shout it at the Israeli army. But still, one of the greatest songs ever written. And I never tire of singing along with it at Elvis Costello gigs. Or anywhere, for that matter.

And while I'm being silly, the stock Ray Banks Noir Originals question, brought kicking and screaming to CrimeSpree: you ever broken someone's nose?

Not me. I'm a lover, not a fighter. Although that still doesn't rule out giving someone a broken nose.

Marra, I don't even want to know... But let's end this seriously: Is there anything you haven't already done in your work that you want to do now?

I don't know, I haven't done it!

I said "seriously", Waites. Don't make me come down there.

Sorry, that's a ridiculously flip answer. There's loads of stuff. There's loads more stories I want to tell. In lots of different ways. I don't think it's the kind of thing where you can reach a plateau and just coast along. Well, some writers can, but I can't. I always want to try new things, new voices, new narratives, new styles. Loads. I'm on my eighth novel now and yes, I have picked up some tricks along the way, but there's still so much to learn. The longer I go on, the less I think I know, the more I want to try. I hope I'm always going to feel that way. The day I don't is the day I jack it in and go do something else.

There's more in the magazine proper. What're you waiting for? Subscribe, you pigs!