

Edinburgh International Book Festival – Val McDermid and Sue Black



An event featuring a crime fiction writer and a professor of forensic anthropology would not immediately strike you as a possible comedy double-act, but this Wellcome Trust event was one of the funniest hours at the Book Festival this week.

Yet again the RBS main theatre was completely full with hardly a spare seat to be seen, and the audience was a truly appreciative one. Fife-born author, Val McDermid, is very well-known in crime fiction circles with over 25 books published since 1987, most featuring the character Dr Tony Hill, brought to life in the TV series *Wire in the Blood*, based on McDermid's book of the same name and starring Robson Green. But she did not say anything much about her forthcoming novel *The Vanishing Point*, and only momentarily touched on some details of the many books she has penned.

This talk was really about how her relationship with Dundee University Professor Sue Black has developed since they met, albeit remotely, while contributing to a radio show from different locations. In the twelve years since, they have enjoyed a great friendship, have contributed to each other's professional lives, and have, in their own words, cleared a few restaurants with their gory conversations.

Black is well qualified to fill in the details needed to make some parts of McDermid's fiction more realistic. As a professor of forensics she has been to many mass death scenes such as Kosovo or to Thailand after the tsunami. She said that she explains the job to prospective students quite simply:- "Your job is to collect and analyse evidence. But you must

remember that it was not you who caused it , and so you must adopt a clinical box inside your head.” As only 25 out of 400 prospective students get onto the course, it is clear they must also have some other pretty special qualities.

McDermid confessed that she feels very privileged to have Black as a friend. “I appreciate the time that Sue shares with me. She is very hard-working and yet will freely spend an hour discussing my latest corpse problem with me.” But in the good-natured banter that was evident throughout the hour, Black said that McDermid is clearly psychologically disturbed wanting to know for example what a body would look like after spending 200 years immersed in a bog. (‘Leather with a face on’, in case you’re interested!)

This is evidently a relationship borne out of mutual respect for each other’s talents. McDermid explained that Professor Black always managed to tell her something new that she did not know previously. For example science has now advanced so that people can be told apart simply by looking at the backs of their hands; each one is as individual as a fingerprint. Paedophiles have been convicted on such evidence, which is clearly one of the rewards of a job that can at times be very gory. (Black explained about having to jump into the Kosovo graves once they had been cleared of rats, of which she has a relentless fear).

Black considers that her job is to develop science in order to solve crimes, and admits that although criminals regularly outwit the professionals, science makes attempts to keep up. One of the latest advances which she has helped make is to develop a programme to speed up one of the more laborious tasks that police have to do, looking through hundreds and often thousands of photographs found on computers during investigations into crimes committed by paedophiles. It is essential that the police identify any new photos, as this will probably trap the criminal who may well have taken these themselves.

During some of the discussion which ensued, Black was asked if she thought a comprehensive DNA database would be a good idea. She explained that through the use of the Guthrie Test among babies, we probably have a fairly full database already in existence. But she admitted that she had doubts about a proper DNA database of every citizen. "If there was perfect security on the DNA database that would be okay, but otherwise we really have to be careful. As a forensic anthropologist I really don't have a lot to do with DNA. Various parties might have an interest in such a resource, such as insurance companies. There are all sorts of issues such as civil liberties at stake."

This relationship is clearly a good one for both of them on a personal level, but now McDermid is trying to offer some payback in assisting with the Million for a Morgue fundraising campaign. The morgue will be built at the University of Dundee and will be a 'world leading forensic centre for scientific research and training.' You can help by going online, pledging a pound in name of your favourite crime writer, and the author with most votes when the target is reached will have the honour of getting the morgue named after them.

There is also the rather innovative fundraising idea that someone could pledge money to have a corpse in a novel named after them, and then there is the Killer Cook Book....

Yes black humour abounds even in this most gory of areas!

You can find out more about the Million for a Morgue campaign [on their website](#) and you can find out more about Val McDermid [on her website](#).