

Val McDermid on top form at the Central Library



'My life', says [Val McDermid](#), 'is a testament to the power of books: they made me.'

This may well be true, but Val has also made quite a few books herself. Prodigious writer, frequent broadcaster, entertaining speaker, highly competitive quiz team member and now unmasked as Threat to a National Treasure, Val has recently moved back to Edinburgh from the Borders. On Thursday she was at the Central Library to talk about her new Tony Hill novel [Cross & Burn](#), although the discussion certainly didn't end there. In conversation with [Christine Hamilton](#), Val soon had the packed and appreciative audience in fits.

Val's love of books started early. She grew up in Kirkcaldy and when she was six years old her family moved to a house opposite the library. Like Roald Dahl's Matilda (though her parents were nothing like the Wormwoods), Val spent most of her time amongst the book stacks, and much as she resented the Presbyterian-style rule that insisted two of her four books should be non-fiction, she realises that this expanded her horizons. One of her favourite writers is [Robert Louis Stevenson](#), whom she discovered at the age of seven via a 'classic comic' version of Treasure Island. She was entranced; for her this book has everything – plot, characters, setting and a clear and lucid language with 'no showing-off.' She re-reads it frequently and always find something new to admire; it showed her what a book could do. Stevenson could turn his hand to everything from verse to travel literature and science fiction, 'whatever mood you are

in, he has something that speaks to you.'

✘ Stevenson doesn't say a great deal about higher education, so all Val knew about that came from her beloved [Chalet School](#) books, from which she learned that her the options were Oxford, the Sorbonne or the Kensington School of Needlework. Val didn't speak French so she applied to [Oxford](#); sewing didn't get a look in, Dior's loss clearly being our gain. [St Hilda's College](#) had never before admitted anyone from a Scottish state school. It was a profound culture shock on both sides – not only did Val have to master Received English, she'd also to deal with vegetables that looked like table decorations and pizzas that were no longer half-moon shaped and covered in batter. Despite all that she had a wonderful time at Oxford, 'I had no chip on my shoulder: these people had the keys to the kingdom, and I wanted them.' She did not find the college snobbish – indeed, she sees now that she was especially well looked after; the Principal even asked her to cat-sit so that Val had somewhere to stay in the holidays. People were, she says, generous, kind and unpatronising; Val was judged only on the quality of her mind. After Oxford, she used that sharp mind in journalism until finally turning to full-time writing in 1991.

✘ Cross & Burn is Val's eighth Tony Hill & Carol Jordan novel. The title comes from a quote, 'The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn'; Tony and Carol need to build some bridges. Unfortunately no-one told Val's publisher's art department that, and their first attempt at the cover showed a rather Klan-like flaming cross. They've sorted that now. At the end of book seven, [The Retribution](#), there seemed no way that Val could get Tony and Carol back in the same room – but she already knew how she could do it. There is, Val says, always a solution to a problem of structure; she thinks about it before she goes to sleep and usually knows the answer in the morning. In Cross & Burn she returns to each character's basic principles –

Carol's drive for justice and Tony's personal empathy – and puts one of them in such a dangerous situation that only the other can help. Val refutes as total rubbish the often quoted idea that 'the characters take on lives of their own' – when she closes the laptop she knows no-one will die until she comes back and lets them. Tony and Carol don't start cavorting the minute her back is turned, 'It's not Toy Story.' Asked by Christine why she'd decided to burn down poor Tony's house, Val insisted that it had given her no pleasure at all; she needed to make Tony suffer, to take away from him one of the things that mattered most. Bit worrying for her neighbours though...

The Hill/Jordan books have been televised by [Coastal Productions](#) as [Wire In The Blood](#), with [Robson Green](#) playing Tony. Val refused several other offers because she didn't like the companies' ideas, but Coastal (Green's own outfit) allowed her to act as a consultant and collaborate on the series. She feels that the end result does occupy the same fictional landscape as the books, and she's even made two cameo appearances herself – though their success may or may not be measured by the fact that Green has told her she can be the corpse in the next one. Green is the only actor who matches Val's idea of how a character looks, so he's the only one who's affected her subsequent writing. Tony is a deep thinker, so for TV it was necessary to invent a visual language to show his thoughts; as a result Tony's now talking to himself more and using a white board to marshal his ideas. Val explained that copyright law is very different in the world of TV; she had to ask Coastal if she could use the Paula McIntyre character, who'd been largely developed by one of the scriptwriters. Coastal agreed, so Val was taken aback to find herself on the end of an irate call from the scriptwriter himself; he'd named Paula after his wife and wasn't happy to find Val had turned her into a lesbian...

Val doesn't get upset when her own books are upsetting,

because she knows what's going to happen next and has spent hours pondering words and cutting the story back to the bare bones so that the reader's imagination supplies the rest (and we all know how scary our own imaginations can be.) She does find other writers' books frightening though – when she read [Denise Mina's Garnethill](#) she woke up screaming. She would not avoid a book because it was frightening, but she won't read what she calls the 'pornography of violence' – the writers, male and female, who glamorise violence against women in a almost gleeful way.

☒ Something that makes Val want to run screaming from the room for very different reasons is working with a children's audience. She wrote the very successful [My Granny is a Pirate](#) for her son, but found it hard work – there are, she says, so many words you can't say and issues you can't allude to. Even illustrator **Arthur Robins'** picture of Jolly Roger peeing on a pirate's wooden leg was axed by the publisher. Despite all this, there's a sequel on its way, **Pirate Granny and the Revenge of the Skeletons**. The first book was turned into a musical last year, and Val's keen to point out that she'd be happy to talk to Pixar (or anyone else) about the film and TV rights. As for those children's audiences, she says the only answer is chocolate money, thrown firmly in the direction of any smarty pants 5 year old's head.

A new project for Val has been the re-imagining of [Northanger Abbey](#). She particularly likes [Austen's](#) original because it's a satire rather than a straightforward romance. This is largely lost on a modern readership (it certainly was on me when I was force-fed it for O-level...) because the object of the satire, the Gothic novel, has been lost; we don't get the jokes. She needed a modern substitute for [The Mysteries of Udolpho](#); the [Twilight](#) books and their numerous imitations were a gift that came along at just the right time. Val went through Northanger Abbey scene by scene, noting in one column what Austen had done and in the other what she needed to do

herself. The only rules laid down by [Harper Collins](#) were that she must stick to the original plot and characters, rules which Val saw as a liberating framework rather than a straightjacket. Northanger Abbey is set in [Bath](#), a place visited by everyone on the eighteenth century social circuit; Val needed to find a backdrop for modern teenagers, a place where they would spend enough time for events to unfold – so where better than the [Edinburgh Festival](#)? This also allowed her to move the Abbey itself to the Borders. The hardest part of the writing was finding the teenage voices of Cat Moreland and her friends; Val didn't want to sound like an Old Person trying to be hip, but she needed to search out trends rather than fads to make sure the book didn't age as quickly as yesterday's frappuccino. In the original Jane Austen focuses on the meaningless over-use of 'nice'; by eavesdropping on her son and his friends, Val hit on 'cool' as the word she needed. 'I've got my finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist. Did I just say that?'

It doesn't end there of course. Having written one non-fiction book twenty years ago (about female private investigators), Val swore she'd never do another one – so needless to say she's almost completed a modern overview of forensics with an historical perspective for the [Wellcome Trust](#). She's found it fascinating to talk to experts in many different disciplines, and fully intends to make use of what she's learned in her subsequent books. She's also about to publish one of her several stand-alone novels, Skeleton Road.

Now that she's back in the city, Christine asked, will it feature in her work? Probably, but even though she's living just round the corner from the [Oxford Bar](#), she somehow doesn't think a meeting between Tony and [Rebus](#) would go too well.

She's also quick to point out that she arrived 'AT' – after the [trams](#) – which she says are one of the most embarrassing things about living in Edinburgh. 'Manchester did it brilliantly – what happened here?'

So that just leaves her assault on a media darling. Val's carving out a name for herself as a quiz maestro, she's been on [Celebrity Mastermind](#) and [Pointless](#). Having been denied the chance in schoolgirl hockey, she's thrilled finally to be representing Scotland on [Round Britain Quiz](#), and she's looking for a pub team to join in Edinburgh. She's so keen that when she appeared on [Only Connect](#) with [Clare Balding](#) she physically shoved the country's favourite broadcaster out of the way to get at the answer. Luckily that bit was edited out, so Val hasn't received any death threats from Clare's fan club. Yet.

This was an entertaining, informative and immensely well-received evening, and credit must also go to Christine Hamilton for her excellent chairing and to **Annie Bell** for her fantastic work in organising **Edinburgh Reads** and bringing brilliant writers like Val to the library.

[Cross & Burn](#) is published by [Little, Brown](#).

[My Granny is a Pirate](#) is published by [Orchard Books](#).

Val will be appearing at the [Borders Book Festival](#) on 14th June 2014.